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CHIOTA, THE CREEK; or, The Three Thunderbolts.

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM"—Major Sam S. Hall,
AUTHOR OF "OLD ROCKY'S BOYEES," "GIANT GEORGE," ETC., ETC.



HE STAGGERED AND FELL AT THE FEET OF CHIOTA'S BEAUTIFUL SQUAW.

Chiota, the Creek;

OR,

The Three Thunderbolts.

A Tale of the Bandera Hills.

BY "BUCKSKIN SAM,"

(MAJOR SAM S. HALL.)

AUTHOR OF "SNAP SHOT," "GIANT GEORGE,"
"THE RANCH RAIDERS," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE BANCROFT "LOCATE."

A QUARTER of a century ago, the vicinity of the Bandera Hills, Texas, was not settled, and it was a favorite lurking place for Indian war-parties; the rough and wooded nature of that section of the Lone Star State affording a safe place for the red marauders to await the return of their skilled scouts or spies, whom they were constantly sending out.

The most westerly ranch on the Rio Medina, at the time referred to, was that of Benjamin Bancroft, familiarly known as "Ben."

Ben Bancroft was well to do in cattle, horses and mules, as well as quite a number of sheep, all of which were kept some five miles from the ranch, in the Bandera Hills; a fine location, and as favorable a section for sheep-raising as could be found in western Texas.

Bancroft Ranch was situated in a horseshoe bend of the Medina river, some thirty miles east of Camp Verde, a military post, and twenty miles north of the town of Castroville. This latter was but a collection of ranches, built near together for mutual protection against the murderous Apaches, Comanches and Mexican marauders of the Rio Grande. At the present time, however, it is quite a considerable town, and in a very flourishing condition.

Ben's ranch was much larger than they are usually constructed. The architecture was of the universally prevailing order. The dwelling was forty-eight feet in length, and one third of that in width, and consisted of two large apartments, with an open space between them. It was built of huge oak logs, hewn on the inner, but left rough on the outer sides, and provided with loop-holes for rifles; thick oaken caps, swinging on pins, covering each aperture.

Roughly constructed chimneys of sticks and mud were erected in the center of each room, as is customary in the far South, and an immense log kitchen stood some twenty feet in the rear of the larger structure, with the inevitable stone bake-oven near at hand.

These buildings faced the neck, or entrance to the bend, the river flowing upon each side, and much of the open plain beyond being within view. Easy-chairs of home manufacture, with raw-hide seats, were scattered through the open space mentioned, while a large dining-table stood in the middle.

From the description thus far given of this typical Southern home one would judge the dwelling to be somewhat of an unsightly object; but it was just the opposite, for a wide piazza extended along both the front and rear of the edifice, and was covered, even to the roof, with a network of flowering vines.

The towering timber of the Rio Medina, a belt some two thousand yards in width, grew in a gracefully curving line from the entrance of the bend, and swept down past the western end of the dwelling and then around the rear and past the eastern end to the entrance again, thus shutting out from view any indication of there being a habitation near, except from the plain at the entrance to the ranch.

The bottom timber was luxuriant, and the branches of the huge trees were entwined with the gayest creepers and festooned with the weird gray Spanish moss. Paths had been cut in the undergrowth in all directions, which were convenient for riding upon horseback, the lower branches of the trees having been removed with this object. The river was narrow and deep at this particular point, and the waters teemed with fish and the delicious soft-shell turtles; but there were also various venomous water-snakes, which were much to be dreaded.

To the south of the "locate" extended a boundless prairie, afar to the horizon line, and also from the timber line beyond the river to the far north. These plains were level as a floor, and reached nearly to Castroville; but as has been mentioned, a five-mile gallop would take one to the Bandera Hills, where a trio of Greasers herded the sheep of Ben Bancroft, encamping with the animals almost continually.

On the east side of the entrance to the bend, within the timber, was a large natural "open," and there the great corrals of the ranch were built, oak pickets some six inches in diameter being placed closely, in a perpendicular position, in a trench three feet in depth. This was then filled in and tramped hard, the pickets forming a fence some eight feet in height.

Such was the ranch and its surroundings.

Now for the occupants of the same.

Ben Bancroft was a man of some fifty-five years of age, of medium height, and strongly built. His hair was sprinkled with gray, his face round and rosy with health, his eyes blue and honest in expression; indeed, Ben was evidently a happy man, having always a pleasant word ready for every one. In short, he had not an enemy in the world.

He was, at this time, a widower, and the father of two children—a boy and a girl—or, we should rather say, a young man and a young lady, for his son was twenty-two, and his daughter sixteen, and nearly developed into womanhood. Both had been at school in San Antonio until a year previous to the opening of our narrative, and they had made good use of the advantages thus enjoyed.

William Bancroft soon became known as "Bandera Bill," the cognomen being given him by the scouts and rangers, from the fact that he was often seen in that locality, and knew well every trail and camping-place, besides all the most favorable points for game. He was a superb specimen of young manhood, with a fine physique, strong, sinewy, and quick of motion; being nearly a head taller than his father, but resembling him strongly in appearance.

He dressed in the style affected on the Rio Grande, in buckskin breeches, which were thrust into top-boots; these last having long roweled spurs buckled to the heels. He had a woolen shirt, with wide flowing collar, and broad-brimmed black felt sombrero, which he wore jauntily pushed back on his shapely head.

In addition, Bill had the usual brace of Colt's revolvers, navy size, and a bowie, buckled about his waist, upon a richly stamped belt.

Last, but far from being least, we come to the daughter, Bertie Bancroft, who had no peer, as all admitted who had the honor of her acquaintance, for beauty, on the upper waters of the Rio Medina; and but few indeed her equals in loveliness at San Antonio—which was saying much, for the Alamo City was, and is noted for its beautiful maidens.

Bertie was of medium height, with well rounded form, and sprightly and joyous in disposition. Her profile was purely Grecian, her complexion naturally fair, but somewhat browned from her prairie gallops beneath the hot southern sun. Her eyes were blue, and lovely in expression, with long lashes; her teeth pearly, and even, with pouting red lips that were ravishing to look upon.

Bertie's hair was abundant, and fell in long wavy masses below her waist. It was a rich golden in color, befitting her complexion and eyes, and greatly enhancing her ethereal loveliness. She was quite too angelic a being to be hidden away on that lonely border, to say nothing of the dangers connected with the life there. Ben Bancroft, however, had not thought it prudent for his children to even visit him, until he had, with his cowboys, an old "Auntie" as cook, and until they had all been a full year in the bend.

Not the slightest indication of danger had, during this time, been discovered, and Ben felt secure in his "locate" before he sent for his children.

Had he dreamed of the dangers and terrible experiences of the future, in connection with his loved ones, he would have cut off his right arm rather than have been the means of influencing them to make the ranch their home.

CHAPTER II.

THE SERPENT IN THEIR EDEN.

BERTIE BANCROFT was the happy possessor of a glossy-coated sorrel mustang, of small size; its mane and tail being several shades lighter than its coat. Mane, tail, and forelock were wavy, and the little animal's ears were small and sharp-pointed, its eyes large, bright, and intelligent; and its nostrils distending at every breath, when at a gallop. This mustang had been lassoed by her brother, and gotten well under control by him, before he presented it to the delighted young girl. She had also a small rifle, with which she practiced in the bottom-timber of the ranch for many days before she attempted to shoot at game.

But Bertie was of a poetic nature, and although she could oft have shot deer and an-

telope, as well as many birds of bright plumage, she had not the heart to point her rifle at them. Flowers, too, were her delight, and in no portion of the American continent could she have better gratified her taste in this connection than in the bottom-timber and bends of the Rio Medina, or the adjacent prairies.

It has been mentioned that Ben Bancroft had no apprehension of any serious danger threatening his ranch, or he would not have had his children, and especially his darling Bertie, come to the Medina. No enemies had been known to be in his neighborhood, up to the time of the advent of Bill and Bertie at the ranch, and thus another year passed by in peace and security.

Bertie had given to her mustang the name "Colorado," meaning red in Spanish.

Three more contented and happy people could not have been found in the Lone Star State, than Ben, Bill, and Bertie Bancroft.

Their home was amid Nature's wildest and most beautiful luxuriance, and their table was supplied with dainties, in the way of game and fish, that would have caused the eye of an epicure to brighten, and his mouth to "water."

After the arrival of his son, the ranchero spent more of his time at home, enjoying his pipe and books; and thus we introduce him and his to our reader.

It was Bertie's birthday, and strange and unjust it was that, upon the very day that our heroine was sixteen years of age, she was fated to undergo great dangers; and that after a year of happy and peaceful security. A perfect paradise on earth was Bancroft Ranch, but it was doomed to become a very hell in sights and sounds, before any great length of time had passed; although none of those whom we have, up to this point in our story, introduced to the reader, had the slightest thought or suspicion of impending danger, or any change in their happy lives.

It was a most beautiful morning, on which the fair Bertie ordered Colorado to be saddled and bridled, by Romeo, a little negro, the son of "Auntie Sue," the old cook. The boy was nine years of age, and a perfect terror to coons, opossums, and cotton-tailed rabbits. Never did he move more expeditiously than when executing an order for his young mistress, who in vain had sought, from the first hour of her arrival, to get him up in some kind of tolerably decent costume.

The young lady had become discouraged in her attempts to keep Romeo in trim, and her slight scowl of displeasure always merged into a smile, which was sure to end in a hearty laugh, as the little ragged, grinning nondescript would lead up Colorado to the veranda steps, place his hand on the back of his woolly pate, and press the same forward in a bow; at the same time scraping one bare foot backward, while he said:

"Mornin', Missie Bertie! Hyer's Col'rado, pert es a cricket, an' jist wile ter tote yer through ther bottom. Ef yer sees any 'possums, tell Romeo when yer 'roves whar dey is, an' I'll jist rake 'em in."

"I believe you would eat opossum every meal in the day, with a lunch of the same thrown in between times," would be the laughing reply of Bertie. "I don't think it best that you should get your clothes in any worse condition than they are, tearing through the undergrowth. However, I'll think of it."

Colorado was full of fire and vim, and waited not for further talk between his mistress and the little darky; and as the former gained her saddle, the animal bounded away, tossing his head, and cavorting, evidently proud of his fair burden. Straight out on the prairie, through grass and flowers, the hoofs of the mustang casting afar myriads of dew-drops, that sparkled like jewels in the rising sun, the pretty pair darted. Here and there on the plain could be seen scattered herds of cattle, mules and horses; while deer and antelope were not wanting, to make the view still more interesting.

Near to the bottom-timber, as Bertie turned and galloped westward, parallel with the Medina river, strutted, with dragging wings and heads proudly poised, hundreds of wild turkeys, the gobblers sending out their defiant challenges to each other, and some engaged in fierce conflict.

But not for a long distance galloped the young girl on the plain west, for she now guided Colorado north, soon darting into the dense undergrowth beneath the towering timber of the Rio Medina. She seemed to be well acquainted with that particular section of the wood, for she "struck" the shades at a point where there

was a well-worn cow-path, and in a very short time reached the river.

Dismounting, Bertie secured Colorado to a limb, and then, from a pocket in her saddle, she took a fishing-line, with cork and hook attached.

She had about her waist a belt which sustained a small bowie-knife, and a miniature five-chambered Colt's revolver. The first named weapon she drew from its scabbard, and after slight search found a long, straight, slender sapling, which she cut and trimmed. This she secured to the smaller end of her fishing-line.

She then sprang from the bank, directly down upon the end of a log, between which and the bank proper was a bed of mud some two feet in breadth. Stepping along the log, Bertie cast her line, after carefully baiting the hook with a large grasshopper.

Almost instantly the cork was jerked under the surface, but the girl succeeded in keeping her footing, while allowing the fish to dart here and there through the water, soon tiring it out, and then drawing it to her. Having caught several fine firm catfish, Bertie started toward the shore, soon standing at the end of the log; when suddenly a shriek of terror, blended with repulsion, burst from her lips.

There, between her and the bank, lay coiled for deadly spring, a huge moccasin snake, its red mouth wide open, and its fearful, poison-loaded fangs darting.

Instantly, with a cry of horror, poor Bertie halted, and stood half-bent, her eyes starting and staring with the fascination of repulsion upon the loathsome reptile.

It was impossible for her to reach the bank without passing it. Paralyzed, she stood as described, her muscles rigid; powerless to move hand or foot, for she fully realized her deadly danger.

Thus for a moment; then the hideous head was drawn downward toward the writhing coil. Bertie could see the muscles of the snake draw, as it gathered strength for its fated lunge forward and upward; but, for her life, she could not break the awful spell that bound her frame as in a vise.

The poor girl's mental prayer for help must have been heard; for, at the very instant the serpent was about to spring, a feathered shaft cut the air, and the head of the beast lay far from its loathsome and writhing body—the feathered end of the arrow projecting at an angle of forty-five degrees from the mud!

This broke the terrible spell, and poor Bertie sprang frantically over the decapitated snake, clutching the bushes in front of her with desperation.

Thus she drew herself upward, and then fell prone and senseless on the upper bank, upon the leafy carpet.

CHAPTER III.

FRESH TERRORS IN FRONT.

AT the very instant that the arrow, which cut the head of the moccasin snake off, shot through the air, a peculiar outcry rung through the arches of the timber. But Bertie Bancroft heard it not. Pallid as a corpse she lay, her golden hair outspread in wild abandon over the dead leaves. Her dress, of some light fabric, green in color, would, at a casual glance, have been supposed to be one of the bushes of the thicket, broken and fallen down. Her hair, without the sunlight to gild it to glittering gold, might pass unnoticed among the decayed leaves and ferns.

The birds had flown to the outermost branches of the bottom-timber, and to the distant prairie, to enjoy the first kisses of the glorious orb of day, and all was silent. But not long did it remain thus.

A sound of crackling bushes was heard, and soon an enormous black bear waddled into view; its great mouth open, revealing its terrible teeth. Instantly, upon clearing the bushes, it snuffed the air, and caught the scent of a human being. The beast paused a moment and gazed around; its eyes becoming at length fastened upon the outstretched form of poor Bertie.

At once the huge animal continued on its course, snuffing the air with elevated nose, at every unwieldy step. In a minute Bruin stood beside the unconscious girl, his muzzle upon her bloodless cheek; his feid breath upon her face, as he snuffed hard, uttering low growls.

But at that moment, a soft whinny from Colorado sounded from down the stream, and the bear started quickly, making a step in the direction from whence the sound had proceeded, its head again elevated.

Just then, the long lashes of Bertie slowly

raised from her pale cheeks, her lids opened, and she gradually realized where she was. But, at the sight before her, she relapsed into the same rigid, speechless state as before.

Luckily the bear had caught scent of the mustang, besides having heard the neighing; the breeze, which however was very light, coming from down the river. At once the brute waddled from the vicinity of the young girl, thinking her dead, and proceeded toward the mustang.

Soon, struggling to a standing position, Bertie Bancroft gazed, with bated breath, down the stream. Clinging to the bushes for support, and trembling in every limb, thus stood the maiden; thoughts flying like wildfire through her tortured brain.

She recalled the fact that she had often heard her father assert that if one pretended to be dead, a bear, unless on the borders of starvation, would not harm him. She felt that her life had been saved in a miraculous manner—that it was most providential she had been unable to move, or articulate a sound, through fright, at that terrible moment when her life depended upon her remaining as still as death. But then she became conscious that her favorite, Colorado, would be torn to pieces by the monster; but, did not this occur—did the horse break loose, and gallop away—might not the bear then return to her?

Bertie felt that such would be the case should the mustang escape; and although she dearly loved Colorado, she knew that the poor beast must be slain, or she herself would become a victim to the bear.

All this was terrible.

Bertie listened as though her life depended upon the nature of the sounds she might hear, as indeed it did.

To her horror she heard the bushes being crushed down, and then a wild snort from Colorado, followed by a furious growl.

The unfortunate girl trampled as if stricken with an ague fit, and very nearly fell to the earth again. Then came sounds that caused her to become faint and sick as death.

These were the unmistakable plunging of her favorite, followed by the snapping of the neck-ropes with a loud twang; and instantly after, the mad gallop of her terrified mustang crashing through the bushes.

Bertie felt that she could not feign death.

She would shriek with terror, did the horrible beast again drag its repulsive tongue over her face. To save her life she could not run away, but she strove to put a little distance between her and the place where she had fallen. So entirely did this new danger occupy the maiden's mind, that she could not bring her thoughts to reason upon her miraculous escape from the moccasin, although it had been brought about in so strange a manner.

She only knew that she must have been saved from a terrible death by an Indian. She was confident of this from the fact that the head of the snake had been shot off by an arrow. Surely no white man could have done this.

But where was her preserver?

Why, if he was friendly to the extent of saving her life once, did he not now come forward, and protect her from the bear?

It certainly seemed to Bertie that she was doomed to die a terrible death, there alone in the dense shades, within a couple of miles of her happy home.

"Oh, God! Give me strength to fly!"

In prayerful agony and most torturing terror, poor Bertie Bancroft shrieked out these words, the bear, meanwhile, rushing toward her, infuriated at the escape of the mustang.

The unhappy girl felt that death stared her in the face—that she had but a moment to live—that her fate was to be torn in pieces, and devoured by the hideous monster that was now rushing madly upon her!

Not until this instant, when the bear was within twenty feet of her, did she recollect that she had her revolver and bowie-knife.

She knew that these weapons would avail her nothing in defending her life; but, for all that, she felt that her brain would burst did she not make an attempt to defend herself. A momentary strength and resolution she was blessed with, and jerking the pistol, she fired in quick succession the five shots.

She was surprised at her command over herself, yet she knew that, should she turn and run, the sounds of the fearful beast in pursuit of her would be more terrible than were she to stand and brave it. The monster gave out furious growls as the bullets struck it, pawing and scratching at the slight wounds they inflicted.

This was but for a moment. Then up the brute arose, with fore-paws outstretched, and waddled with open mouth toward poor Bertie to inclose her in a fatal grasp.

Throwing her revolver directly at the bear's eyes, true to aim, she jerked her bowie; but, at that instant, a sudden weakness caused her to stagger toward a bush, which she clutched for support, praying for strength to escape.

Then a fresh sound fell upon her ear, and an Indian, with eagle feathers flaunting—a very Hercules in appearance—sprung from the thicket between her and the bear.

Buckskin leggings, green breech-cloth, and moccasins made from the hide of a buffalo calf—these composed the costume of the savage chief who now stood braced to meet the monster, his well-formed head proudly poised, and forming a picture that would have driven an artist half-insane with delight.

Thus they stood. The huge bear approaching the prince-like red-man with paws outstretched; the pallid maiden, angelic in her ethereal beauty, her fair face expressing gratitude, relief and dread anxiety alternately, as she clutched the bushes with one hand, her little bowie in the other, and gazed with painful intensity at the movements of the terrible beast. It was possible that the latter might conquer the brave son of the forest, to whom Bertie felt positive she owed her life when the venomous serpent was about to spring and bury its deadly fangs in her flesh.

Not for an instant was the gaze of the Indian fastened upon the maiden whom he had bound to save. His whole attention was riveted upon the bear, which was probably the largest animal of its kind that he had ever beheld.

A moment the beast made halt and gazed at the red chief. Then, with a half-snarl, half-growl, it waddled toward its intended victim.

CHAPTER IV.

DANCING FAWN.

ABOUT half an hour previous to the time Bertie Bancroft stood upon the log, fishing, the bear approached the same point, from up the Rio Medina—but turned toward the south plain—an Indian of magnificent physique, accompanied by a beautiful squaw; the latter, one of a thousand in this respect.

Both were well mounted upon half-breed stock, the animal ridden by the Indian being of large size and strong build, but quick of motion, and with fiery eyes.

Small, sharp-pointed ears, which were almost continually being pricked in every direction, proved that the animal was not unaccustomed to startling dangers, sudden alarms, and that it was constantly on the alert for the same.

From the fact that this Indian had a Mexican saddle and a carbine, as well as a large-sized Colt's revolver in his belt, it was evident that he was a friendly red-man, and one who affiliated with the Texans, probably as a scout and trailer. Such was really the case, although he was an independent scout, his services being wholly voluntary.

His name was Chiota, and he was a Creek; he being called "Chiota, the Creek," to distinguish him from another well-known Indian scout of the same name, but who belonged to the Caddo tribe.

He was the man who had shot off the head of the moccasin snake; and we have but a few more descriptive words to write, in addition to those included in the previous chapter.

Chiota used the jaw-strap of his people in place of a bridle.

He also retained the short bow and quiver of arrows, slung at his back, notwithstanding that he was supplied with revolver and rifle.

His face was intelligent, and it was evident, from the contour of the same, and the lighter red of his skin than is usual among his tribe, that he had some white blood in his veins. This, too, would at once have been noticed in the color of his squaw.

Chiota's broad breast and cheeks were ornamented—in an Indian's opinion—with stripes of vermilion and lines of black pigment, and dotted with yellow ocher—the war-paint of his people. His squaw, who rode in his rear, was richly attired in fawn-skin leggings, and a skirt and bodice of the same material, her moccasins being of wolf-skin, divested of hair. These were all artistically ornamented with beads, feathers and porcupine quills, as well as with perforated wolves' teeth.

Her hair, like that of Chiota, was black as ebony, but less coarse than is common among her people, and hung loosely and long; being

kept back of the ears by a beaded fillet. For a squaw, she was exceedingly handsome.

The scalps carried by Chiota were none of them, from the heads of white people; all being the coarse black hair of the Comanche, Apache, or Kiowa.

As has been said, Chiota and his squaw, Dancing Fawn, turned away from the river, before reaching the near vicinity of the point where Bertie was engaged in fishing.

They proceeded, however, but a short distance from the river when, upon entering a small natural "open" in the timber, both dismounted, removed their equipments, and immediately staked their horses upon the rich bottom-grass.

From a pair of *malettos*, or saddle-bags, Dancing Fawn then produced a quantity of barbecued buffalo-meat, and some cakes of corn meal. The two then sat upon the sward, and partook of this frugal meal in silence. But their appetite could not have been half satisfied, when the shriek of Bertie Bancroft, as she perceived the moccasin snake, shot through the timber; and, with an "Ugh" of surprise, Chiota passed his revolver to his squaw, that she might protect herself, should occasion require it; and then, drawing bow and arrow, sprung at full speed through the undergrowth, knowing, not only by the intonation of the cry, that a woman was in danger, but that it was a white woman.

In a very short time Chiota reached a point where, from the bushes, he beheld the most beautiful being he had ever seen, and she in imminent danger of death.

But, lovely as was the maiden, the chief gave her but a single glance. He then concentrated his whole gaze upon the serpent, calculating the distance. He well knew that the life of this white squaw depended upon his skill and promptness; and, as the reader already knows, Chiota made a telling shot, cutting off clean the head of the snake.

But, no sooner had he done this, than the danger signal of his tribe sounded in his amazed ears; proceeding, as he well knew, from his squaw, Dancing Fawn. This necessitated his immediate departure.

Without further thought of the beautiful maiden—for whom, under the circumstances, he could do nothing more—Chiota sprung at headlong speed, toward the point where he had left Dancing Fawn. But, before he had passed half the distance, two sharp reports of a revolver, one quick following the other, rung and echoed through the bottom-timber, causing the chief to make herculean efforts to reach the "open." Soon he sprung from the shades to behold a sight that filled him with pride and exultation, in place of the most poignant anguish which he had apprehended.

For, in the middle of the "open," standing firm and straight as the shaft of a lance, her black eyes glittering with vengeful fury, revolver tightly clutched and trigger ready for a third shot—thus stood Dancing Fawn!

In front of the beautiful squaw, and not more than ten paces from her, lay a hideously-painted Apache brave, the blood welling from his breast. The snake-like eyes of the Apache, which were dimmed by approaching death, were fixed upon the handsome Creek woman, to whom he owed his fatal wounds. His lips were slowly moving in a half-whispered death-chant, which, for shame at having been killed by a squaw, he could not utter aloud.

But, as Chiota bounded into the "open," the eyes of the dying warrior turned, and became filled with hatred, and he hissed out:

"Chiota, friend of white dogs, who build log-lodges on the red-men's hunting-grounds. Chiota is a coyote. Red Wolf is an Apache. Red Wolf spits in the face of Chiota."

The Creek chief folded his arms across his broad breast, and strode with proud mien, contempt and derision shooting from his eagle eyes, as he returned:

"Chiota, the Creek's hatchet is in his belt, and not in the ground. So many moons"—extending the fingers and thumb of one hand—"has the Good Spirit sat in the sky to light His children on the war-path, since Chiota had many mustangs. Chiota had father, had mother. Chiota has now no father, no mother. Their scalps hang on belt of an Apache. Chiota's mustangs eat grass in Apache hunting-grounds beyond Pecos."

"Red Wolf was on war-path that led where father and mother of Chiota lived in peace. Their old eyes were glad when they looked at many mustangs on prairie. Mustangs were Chiota's; but he was gone for his squaw, toward the land where white rain falls."

"When Chiota come back, with joy in his eye, the lodge of father and mother was gone. Mustangs were gone. Trail point to Pecos. Trail black with fire, red with blood."

The voice of Chiota had gradually become louder and louder as he proceeded, and filled with vengeful fury.

The Creek chief continued:

"Red Wolf is a coyote. Lone Wolf should put petticoats on him. Red Wolf should sweep lodge. Red Wolf should not go on war-path. Red Wolf is a dog, and dies by the hand of squaw of Chiota, the Creek."

"Squaws of Creeks wipe moccasins on Apache braves, and laugh at them. Squaws of Creeks scalp Apaches. They spit in faces of braves of Lone Wolf. Red Wolf's scalp shall hang on belt of Dancing Fawn."

The furious contortions of the dying Apache, under these insulting words, were simply terrible. He tore a tuft of grass from the sod, pressing the same over his wounds to stop the flow of blood, staggering to his feet before the Creek chief had ended his tirade. Fumbling with weak fingers, the Apache drew, slowly and with great difficulty, his scalping-knife, and staggered toward Chiota, saying, in hoarse tones:

"Chiota's knife must find heart of Red Wolf. Red Wolf dies not by hand of squaw."

Thus the stricken brave attempted to pass the space that separated him from his hated foe, but he overrated his strength. Not half the distance was passed, when, with a death-howl trembling on his lips he staggered, and fell at the feet of Chiota's beautiful squaw.

Chiota's keen eyes now, for the first time, were bent upon his squaw, with a look of pride and commendation, as he said:

"Blood of chiefs in Dancing Fawn. She heap brave. She good squaw for Chiota. Take scalp of Red Wolf. It is good."

"Dancing Fawn wants not dirty scalp of Apache. Scalp must hang on belt of Chiota," returned the squaw, with evident disgust.

Soon the reeking trophy was torn from the Apache's head, and secured to the Creek's saddle. The latter then asked:

"Where come Apache?"

Dancing Fawn pointed to the bushes on the west side of the "open," answering:

"Red Wolf look through bushes. Then Dancing Fawn give signal for Chiota. Then shoot quick. Apache fall."

"Good, heap good," commented the chief.

Just then, the snort of the mustang, and the growl of the bear reached them. Chiota recalled the beautiful maiden, and knew that she was again in deadly danger. Bounding from the side of his squaw, he said:

"White squaw, with hair like sun, heap sick on river-bank. Come!"

CHAPTER V.

SAVED A SECOND TIME.

WE left Chiota, with knife in hand, before the monster bear, and braced for combat. The blade of the red chief was yet stained with the blood of the Apache. Dauntless he stood, his ebon eyes watching the slightest movement of the beast; he knowing well that the apparently unwieldy paws could, and would, dart electric-like, one blow, from which, if not avoided, he would be at once laid low.

Yet, firm he stood, calculating the advantages he intended to take. He was a true type of all that is brave, and dauntless, and daring.

The monster bear stood nearly as high on its haunches as the chief—a most powerful brute, that could easily have broken the neck of a mustang with one blow from its sinewy paw, and then dragged its prey to its covert, to devour the carcass.

Bertie strove to cry out, but her tongue clave to the roof of her mouth. But she felt that she must do something to aid her would-be preserver; and, staggering forward, she placed her little revolver in his left hand.

Chiota glanced contemptuously at it, but the next moment cocked it, took deliberate aim, and planted a leaden pellet directly in the eye of the bear, destroying the sight.

He then darted forward, and buried his knife in the rear of the shoulder blade, near the joint of the same; bounding aside, as the terrible paw, with great rapidity, shot backward, and then forward, in an attempt to tear open his body.

At the moment that Bertie Bancroft passed her pistol to Chiota, Dancing Fawn broke from a thicket, and stood for an instant, gazing at the terrible tableau.

The squaw was filled with admiration and solicitude for the maiden, who had proved that she was not entirely wanting in bravery.

At once she stepped toward Bertie, with a kindly greeting in her eye. But the young girl saw not the squaw, until the latter caught her by the arm, saying:

"Come! Heap bad place for squaw with white face, and hair that Good Spirit has painted with fire of sun. Chiota is Creek chief. Great bear die quick. What name white squaw? Where trail to log-lodge?"

Bertie gazed into the face of the Indian woman a moment, walking beside her toward the line of thickets. Soon the latter paused, turned about, and pointing toward Chiota and the bear, exclaimed:

"Look!"

Condemning herself for having momentarily forgotten her deliverer, and impressed by the look and manner of Dancing Fawn, the young girl now gazed at the unequal combat between the red man and the black monster. The scene was doubly terrible then to contemplate, yet the stoical face of the squaw betrayed naught of anxiety or apprehension in connection with the peril of her lord.

Within five feet of the chief, who stood firm in his tracks, the huge brute now arose upon its haunches; this time attesting to its mad rage.

Again the pistol of Bertie was leveled, and instantly the slight report followed, the little bullet penetrating the other eye of the beast, thus rendering the brute totally blind! With terrible growls, it rolled over in agony, while Chiota strode toward Dancing Fawn and Bertie, making halt before them, saying, as he passed his knife to his squaw:

"Dancing Fawn has sent an Apache on the long, dark trail. Let her show pale-face squaw she can kill big bear."

"Oh, do not go near the terrible brute!" pleaded Bertie; "he will kill you. Can you not shoot him with that big revolver?"

Dancing Fawn held the six-shooter in hand, with which she had shot Red Wolf, and she might have passed the weapon to her chief the moment she entered the clear space and discovered the beast, but she knew that Chiota would not, in this way, risk betraying his presence, to the peril of the white maiden and herself.

Poor Bertie was in a most demoralized state of mind, and no wonder, for she was of a very nervous temperament, and had met the first real personal danger of her life but a short time previous. She dreaded, therefore, to see Dancing Fawn attack the enraged and struggling bear.

The young squaw hesitated not for an instant, but, taking the knife from Chiota, she released herself from Bertie's grasp and sprung forward, without any sign of fear, or even caution. Picking up a club of dead wood, she struck the wounded beast hard upon its nose-bone.

With a roar of pain, the brute reared upon its haunches, snuffing the air to gain knowledge of the position of its tormentor. Then it was that Dancing Fawn darted swiftly around the beast, and before it could turn about, plunged the knife into its heart. With a fearful growl the monster fell forward in the agonies of death.

"Thank God!" burst promptly from Bertie's lips.

Then, taking a hand of both her preservers, the young girl led them down the river, and to the edge of the bank. Below lay the dead moccasin.

"Look, Dancing Fawn!" she exclaimed. "There I stood, on that log, but a short time ago, and would have been bitten by that loathsome serpent, had not some one shot off its head. Do you know whose arrow that is?"

"Chiota's," was the laconic reply.

Bertie looked up in the Creek's face, and said, in grateful tones:

"You have twice saved my life this terrible day, and I will never forget to pray for you and Dancing Fawn while I live."

"It is good!" returned Chiota; "Great Spirit hear his child when whisper."

"My name is Bertie—Bertie Bancroft. Won't you come to my home, and make it yours as long as you wish? My father and my brother, whom they call Bandera Bill, will be rejoiced to know you, and will thank and bless you for saving my life."

The words of the maiden seemed to make a deep impression upon the minds of her untutored red friends. They both gazed into her beautiful eyes of blue, as she spoke, and studied her every expression of word and feature. Each pressed the hand of the angelic girl, so widely different in every respect from themselves, and their eyes expressed the gratification they felt at her words, the general meaning of which they understood.

Chiota's eyes betrayed more than usual excitement and pleasure when Bertie mentioned the name of Bandera Bill; and when she had finished speaking he quickly returned:

"Bertie's talk heap good. Sweet in Chiota's ears as song of birds when he come to timber from long trail on dry plain. Chiota will not forget words of Bertie. He is brother; Dancing Fawn, she sister to Bertie. It is good.

"Soon go log-lodge of Bertie. Must go in woods. Get mustangs. Dancing Fawn will ride to log-lodge with Bertie. Chiota come when sun go sleep. Bertie say Bandera Bill he brother. It is good. Chiota has smoke peace-pipe with brother of Bertie, in Bandera Hills."

"Oh, is that really so? I am truly delighted to know that you have met my brother. It is strange he has never spoken of you to me."

"Bandera Bill hunt in hills. Two suns come—" pointing to the east, and circling to the west twice—"two suns go since eyes of Chiota see brother of Bertie. See once. Trails cross more. Chiota glad, heap glad.

"Bandera Bill great brave. Good on hunt. Good see trail. Good throw lasso. Bertie stay, Dancing Fawn stay. Chiota get mustang. Bear stampe horse of Bertie. Run fast to log-lodge."

Before bringing his remarks to a close, the chief strode away, disappearing in the thickets; Bertie, in a sisterly manner, expressing thanks and joy alternately for her deliverance, and to know that Chiota had met Bandera Bill, who had been absent from home three days.

Soon the Creek appeared, leading his own and Dancing Fawn's mustangs; he assisting Bertie upon his animal, and then, with a significant glance into the face of his squaw, bidding them hasten to Bancroft Ranch, where he promised to put in an appearance at or before the time when the sun "went to sleep."

CHAPTER VI.

FOR LIFE OR DEATH.

DANCING FAWN knew by the flitting glance of Chiota, as well as if he had spoken at length, that upon consideration he had decided that danger still lurked in the vicinity; to avoid which she must at once accompany Bertie to the ranch, or harm might befall them.

The young squaw had also understood a significant look which the chief gave her when he proposed going for the mustangs; and she knew that Chiota did not wish Bertie to see the corpse of the hideous Apache. Both the Creek and his squaw were aware, from the words and actions of the white maiden, that a sight which would not in the least affect themselves would overwhelm her with horror and deathly terror.

Besides this, the chief was confident that Red Wolf had been a side scout, or spy, to some war-party of his tribe, who could not be a great distance from the Medina bottom-timber. Consequently Chiota had been surprised but little at the presence of an Apache at that point, and knew it would be a preposterous idea to suppose that Red Wolf had been at any great distance from his brother butchers.

It might have been attended with great danger to both his squaw and Bertie, had they accompanied him to the "open," and made the start for the ranch from that point. The Creek chief proceeded but a few paces into the undergrowth, when he strode so rapidly from the side of the mustangs, after assisting the young girl into the saddle, which was of course his own. He then halted, and stole silently on his back trail, peeping through the foliage to assure himself that Bertie and his squaw had obeyed his orders.

Not that he doubted Dancing Fawn would start at once, but he thought Bertie might insist upon proceeding directly toward the open south plain, in place of keeping within the shades—the safest course under the circumstances.

He had given a gesture to his squaw as to the direction he wished her to proceed, and now to his relief he saw the handsome pair proceeding down the bank of the river; the mustangs having snorted with fright, and sprung wildly aside from the carcass of the bear, nearly throwing Bertie to the earth, and causing her to scream out in her alarm. Dancing Fawn, however, had clutched her fair friend, and sustaining her, urged her steed alongside, and thus the two rode on.

Satisfied that the females were safe, the chief continued on toward the "open," which he had intended should be the camping place of himself and squaw during the remainder of the day and the coming night, but for the events recorded; which, as a matter of course, had been undreamed of by Chiota. He did not, however, proceed as he had previously done; for he knew

that by such a passage of time, any comrade scout of Red Wolf, who might have heard the reports of the revolver fired by Dancing Fawn, were possibly in the immediate vicinity.

In consequence of this, Chiota, after advancing with stealthy tread for some distance, dropped upon hands and knees, with scalping-knife between his teeth, and crawled, noiselessly as a serpent, onward toward the little "open," where lay the corpse of the Apache warrior.

He had taken the precaution of secreting his rifle in a thicket at the north side of the "open," but had bade his squaw retain his revolver, as she would probably need it; for Chiota was not free, by a great deal, from the superstition of his people, and as the day—considering the place—had proved quite eventful, he believed that there would yet occur tragic scenes within a circle of a few miles, either before or after the sun "went to sleep."

The chief secured his rifle before reaching a point from which he could view the "open."

The weapon was loaded, and reliable. Besides this, he had his bow and quiver at his back, which he had cast aside previous to his struggle with the bear. He felt equal and able to battle with a half-dozen Apaches, unless they "jumped" him unawares, which he was resolved they should not do.

A moment after, he was peeping through the screen of leaves, and he was now very glad that he had prevented the females from going direct toward the plain, or visiting the "open."

And why?

For a very good reason.

Two fierce, most hideous, war-painted Apaches stood, one on either side of the corpse of Red Wolf. That they were furious for revenge was plainly to be seen. Also, that they had but that moment arrived, for they appeared greatly puzzled.

There was "sign," in plenty, all around them; but they had not, as yet, had time to examine it, and when they did, it would be next to impossible for them to decide who it was that had slain their comrade brave.

They would, without doubt, decide that a white man had done the deed, for the reason that Red Wolf had been shot with a rifle or revolver, for very few, even of the friendly Indians, at the time of which we are speaking, owned either of these arms.

Chiota was filled with great exultation on beholding two more of the enemies he so hated since the slaying of his aged father and mother, and the stealing of his mustangs by the torturers of the Pecos; and he had sworn, by the dead, never to spare the life of an Apache who should cross his trail.

At once he resolved that three fresh scalps should hang at his belt, in place of but one.

He believed that he could easily slay the two Apache warriors.

A moment's reasoning convinced the Creek that the war-painted pair would not leave the vicinity until they had convinced themselves, if possible, who had slain Red Wolf, and where the slayer had gone. They would study the "sign," and follow the trail to the bank of the river, where, in the softer soil at some points, they would discover tracks that would betray the enemy who had shot their brother brave.

And Chiota was right in this conclusion; for, after a few guttural words passing between them, interlarded with fierce oaths in the Spanish tongue, both braves shot sweeping glances of suspicion around the thickets that bordered the "open;" but, satisfied that their intended victim—the slayer of Red Wolf—had departed, they proceeded, half-bent, and at times low upon hands and knees, to inspect every point where the grass had, in the least, been trampled.

One of them soon discovered that the trail led from the "open" toward the river, but he said nothing to his comrade, but crawled at once into the undergrowth, and along the plainly-marked trail toward the river; unconscious that the very man, he was trailing, was following him closely.

Chiota had watched keenly the other brave, and knew he had not seen his comrade enter the thicket; consequently he would not, for some little time, discover the exact point, and follow.

The chief knew well the reason for the first warrior's keeping his discovery to himself.

He saw that the trail was fresh, and he wished to gain renown, and a scalp; and, if he proceeded not with caution, he might be outwitted by the other warrior.

This just suited Chiota, and he stole stealthily forward, not wishing to attack his foe, until as far as possible removed from the other.

When the successful Apache reached the long

narrow clear space, he at once discovered the carcass of the bear, and uttered an "Ugh" of surprise, which proved he had decided that those he was trailing were some distance down the river from the dead bear. Instantly the Apache ran, half-bent, along the ground; passing around, and examining the carcass. Then he discovered the trail of our three friends.

Here the ground was soft, and as but few dead leaves were on the verge of the bank, the plain trail of the Creek chief and the two females was revealed, to the evident amazement and fury of the Apache trailer; for he clutched at the handle of his knife, and his black eyes shot glances around, more suspicious, after discovering that the slayer of Red Wolf had been an Indian. Suddenly, however, it appeared to occur to the red trailer to look over the bank, beyond the line of bushes.

Parting these, the Apache gave a grunt, and the murderous expression in his eyes deepened, as he cast one glance backward. He then sprang upon the log, leaned over, and plucked the arrow, which Chiota had left there, from the mud.

A glance at the feathered shaft revealed the totem of Chiota, the Creek—a calumet and an arrow, crossing each other mid-way, signifying peace or war, indifferently to the owner.

No longer did the trailer wish to proceed alone, after making this discovery, for he dreaded the Creek chief. But why had the latter wasted an arrow in killing a moccasin snake?

Glancing at the bank in front of him, the Apache detected the imprint of a lady's shoe.

All was now plain.

He looked at the log in his rear, and perceived evidences of the presence of Bertie, by the bruised bark; it being partially decayed.

The spy knew as well as if he had been a witness of the scene, what had but recently occurred there. Some white woman had been in danger of being bitten by the snake, and the reptile had been shot by Chiota, the Creek.

This infuriated the Apache trailer.

While thus standing, his breast thrown upward, and off his guard, Chiota sprang upon the edge of the bank, and clutching his foe by the throat, buried his long knife deep in the Apache's breast, cleaving his heart with the blow.

A convulsive contortion of frame, a gurgling sound from the doomed savage, and then, out from wound, and mouth, and nostrils, spurted the red life-blood. Out the knife was jerked dexterously, and in an instant circled around the head of the Apache. The scalp was torn off while the victim was yet alive, and the quivering body then tossed beside the carcass of the bear.

Then Chiota bounded into an adjacent thicket.

Not a sound had broken the stillness of the bottom-timber, to betray the slaying of the red spy.

A couple of moments after, a hideously-painted face might have been seen, framed in the foliage of a thicket, bordering the narrow "open," and from out the paint daubs two black bulging eyes shot glances of superstitious terror and dumfounded amazement, at the scalpless corpse of the Apache, reclining upon the carcass of the monster bear. The other red trailer had come to join his fellow brave.

But to join him he must go on the "long dark trail."

And Chiota had decided that the two should not be separated even in death.

A blood-curdling death-howl was heard, and in two minutes more the two red spies lay side by side upon the carcass of the bear, while, with their reeking scalps circling above his eagle-feathers, Chiota, the Creek, shot out the terrible war-cry of his tribe, regardless of the probability of there being other enemies near at hand—the war spirit of his people ruling his whole being.

CHAPTER VII.

BANDERA BILL.

"I HAVE often spoken to my sister Bertie about you, Frank, and also to my father; and you must advance no excuses this trip against accompanying me home to the ranch. The friends whom I value most are you and Chiota, with his beautiful young squaw, Dancing Fawn; and none of you has ever honored Bancroft Ranch with even a passing call. I was at the Creek's cave yesterday, before sunrise, and he promised me that they would be at the ranch in three days at the furthest.

"Now, Frank, do say you will go home with me, and then we shall make a merry party. We

shall be able to take a hunt together on the Rio Medina. What say you, pard?"

"I'll go, old boy. I have the greatest desire to meet your father, as well as your sister, of whom I have heard so much. I appreciate your kindness, and thank you for your oft-repeated invitation. I have no doubt we shall have a gay old time of it; especially if Chiota and Dancing Fawn are there; and you can bet your life if they said they will go, they will be there. They never break their word. The chief is the noblest Indian I ever knew. He is a 'white' man, as we say in Texas, if his skin is red; and he is fearless to a fault."

"Yes, Bill, I'll go with you; for I shall not be expected for a few days, on the Frio, where, at my father's ranch, I hope to entertain you and yours at no distant date."

"Thanks, Frank! I am rejoiced to have, at last, prevailed upon you to accompany me home. You will be a frequent visitor, I am confident, after you have become acquainted. Bertie is a darling of a girl, if I do say it, and as pretty as a pink; besides being overflowing with life and good spirits."

The speakers were two young Texans, one of them having already been brought before the notice of the reader; he being none other than Bandera Bill, the brother of Bertie Bancroft.

His companion was Frank Forbes, whose father "ranch"ed it" on the Rio Frio; and he was everywhere known throughout that section of the country as "Frio Frank."

He was of about the same height and build as Bandera Bill, and as handsome in form and face.

Either of them would have attracted, and held general notice, even in a crowd of fine-looking men. Intelligence, honor, and honesty were plainly stamped upon their open faces, and indicated by their free and fearless glance; their every look and motion being winning and graceful. A more impressive pair could scarcely have been found.

They had, as the words of Bill have shown, been acquainted for some time; and often had the latter invited Frank to visit him. Both had met Chiota and his squaw, but never had happened to meet the Creeks when together.

The young men were good trailers, Bill having gained much of his knowledge in this connection from Frank, who had been on the more exposed Frio some two years; his father having moved from Eastern Texas, where the young man had been educated. Since he had been on the Rio Frio, he had seen but little female society, except that of his mother and sister. The latter, Floss Forbes, was a beautiful brunette, and much admired; but Frank had been rather backward about visiting Bancroft Ranch, the extreme loveliness and intelligence of Bertie having been so often spoken of in his hearing, that he had formed the opinion that he would be embarrassed and diffident in her company; consequently he had, time after time, put off his visit.

We have seen, however, that Frank had at last accepted his pard's invitation.

But he dreamed not that, from deciding to accompany Bill home, he almost at that very hour launched himself upon a sea of danger, where death, in a horrible shape, stared him in the face—that, by accompanying his friend, his whole life would be changed; that he would experience the most heavenly happiness, heretofore undreamed of, but mixed with anguish the most poignant, and torture of body and soul.

But so had the Fates decreed.

"I have heard much of your sister, pard Bill," returned Frank to the last assertion of his companion—"and indeed, who has not? I shall be very much pleased to meet her, but I fear that, from the fact that I have not mingled in the society of ladies for two long years, I shall not know how to act, and she will think me rough and uncouth, awkward and countrified."

"Well, upon my word!" said Bill, in surprise and amusement. "Why, Frank, you are reflecting upon me when you talk in that way."

"I am sure you would make fully as gentlemanly an appearance, and act and speak as well as I possibly could, to save me. You astonish me, and I have a great notion to tell Bertie one of these days."

"For Heaven's sake, don't do that, Bill!" pleaded Frank. "I have agreed to go with you home, and that ends it. I'll try and demean myself in a manner not to disgrace myself too much."

"You are too provoking, old fellow. I shall begin to think that you have heretofore declined my invitations for the reason that you had decided in your own mind that you would not

know how to conduct yourself in Bertie's presence. I never thought before that you entertained so unworthy an opinion of yourself. But, to the winds with this nonsense."

"You will bless the day you first crossed my father's threshold. I am confident of that, for I anticipate that you and I will pass many happy hours together at Bancroft Ranch."

"And at Forbes Ranch, also, Bill."

"Well, yes, for I intend to return to the Frio with you this trip if nothing prevents, as I want to know your father, mother, and sister. I know I shall regard them all highly."

"But, let us ride along. We have been allowing our nags their own gait pretty much."

"That suits me, Bill. Drive spurs, and on to Bancroft Ranch."

The young Texans had been riding quite slowly, their horses having jogged along in a walk during the conversation of their masters.

They had been pursuing a serpentine course between the scattering, irregular cluster of elevations, known as the Bandera Hills; the same being nearly covered with dwarf mesquite and other thorny trees, with clumps of prickly pear; while between the hills were *mottes* of oak and the taller mesquites of the lowland.

For some distance the pair galloped here and there, in the zig-zag course which they were forced to travel, keeping as near as was possible toward the eastward. Both were busy with their thoughts; indeed, they galloped now with such speed that, had they wished to converse, they would have been forced to yell aloud.

But their keen eyes habitually roved to right and left with piercing glances, although neither of them had any suspicion of danger in that locality.

Soon they reached a point where two long, ridge-like hills lay parallel with, and quite near each other; thus forming, as their inner sides were nearly perpendicular, a gorge-like passage into which the young Texans galloped, proceeding down the same unhesitatingly.

Half the distance between the rocky walls, however, had been but passed, when, to the utmost amazement and concern, mingled with no little dread, full a score of Apache braves, in full war-paint and flaunting feathers and scalps, dashed into and up the eastern outlet of the gorge, and with fierce and blood-curdling whoops, lashed their mustangs headlong toward them.

"Great heavens!" exclaimed Bill; "we are lost!"

The sight was truly terrible.

Both whirled their steeds at the same time, jerking their carbines from their saddle-borns; when, as they drove spurs on their back trail, with the intention of attempting to escape through the speed of their animals, to their increased horror, they beheld an equal number of red fiends of the Rio Pecos dash into the western end of the passage.

"We are indeed gone up, pard Frank," said Bill, quickly; "we are in a trap. There is no escape for us, but let us die fighting. Down with the red demons!"

"Give them hot lead, pard; and may God help us! We'll go on the long dark trail together."

Each urged his horse up beside the other, and their hands met in a farewell grasp.

Then, as hand unclasped from hand to clutch at carbine, spurs were driven rowel deep, and toward the oncoming whooping horde dashed the apparently doomed pair. Their sombrero brims were blown high up from their foreheads by the force of their terrific speed. Their faces were filled with a determined desperation that well befitted the sons of the Lone Star State.

Up went carbines to shoulders, and twin spurts of flame shot forth; the ounce slugs tearing through the air, and through the vitals of the braves in the advance—ay, through and beyond, causing yells of agony, and howls of death!

A perfect hell of sounds filled the air behind them, but the dauntless pair, presenting an heroic disregard of death that impressed even their ruthless foes, pressed on at terrific speed, slinging their now useless carbines to their saddle-borns, there being no time to reload.

Then up in either hand of each shot the deadly tubes of their Colt's army "sixes," and with bridle-reins between their teeth, the desperate pair, although black death stared them in their faces, drove spurs once more; and on, directly into the horde of howling Apaches, they dashed—spurts of fire, and leaden messengers of death bursting from their terrible tubes with great rapidity. Yet, all this time, not an arrow had left bow; not a lance had been poised.

Soon, however, fierce rallying cries filled the air, and many lassoes, serpent-like, hissed from

all points; the nooses encircling the heroic Texans. The next instant, they lay upon the bloody sward, amid the slain, helpless as babes; half a dozen rawhide ropes drawn tight about them, binding their strong arms to their sides, while with exultant whoops and vengeful yells, the paint-daubed fiends, upon their snorting mustangs that reared and pranced, encircling the two prairie pards, who then regretted that a score of arrows had not pierced their vitals. For, well they knew that a fearful torture was in store for them.

Yet no sign of fear was upon their pale faces, as their red captors roughly replaced them on their saddles, and securely bound them to the same. Then, again the eyes of the two young men met. And who would wish to meet such a glance? It was like the gaze of two dying men, one at the other; but more awful, for the dread fate that must be theirs, ruled the brain of each at that dread moment.

But their utter despair at the thought of their terrible position and coming more terrible fate, was quickly banished. Poising themselves as proudly as possible, though bound, and with defiance expressed in their faces, they both shot glances of dauntless daring, mingled with contempt, into the black eyes that flashed from their framework of war-stripes.

Eight braves lay dead, and several more were severely wounded.

These were placed upon their saddles and bound there, the dead being soon after entombed in a cavern, the entrance to which was then closed with a wall of rocks. Then on to the eastward galloped the Apache horde, being soon joined by another body of braves—all speeding to spread desolation and death along the Rio Medina, with Bandera Bill and Frio Frank in their midst, and reserved for the torture.

But, worse than all, the young Texans now realized that their merciless captors were heading directly down the Medina, and in the direction of Bancroft Ranch. This was worse than even the thought of their own dread fate.

There could be no torture inflicted on them to equal this.

Who can in the slightest degree picture to himself the mental agony, the soul deep anguish of Bandera Bill, as this awful probability was forced upon his already nearly crazed brain?

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CREEK'S DISCOVERY.

CHIOTA, after disposing of the two Apache trailers to his satisfaction, lost no time in lingering near the river.

No longer was there the slightest doubt in his mind in regard to there being an Apache war-party near at hand; but he had good grounds for believing that he and Dancing Fawn had slain all the side scouts that had been dispatched to the bottom-timber, evidently for the purpose of following the same down the stream in search of the dwellings of the ranch to which the stock of horses and cattle on the south plain belonged.

Chiota reasoned that the cattle and horses having been discovered from afar by the war-party, the chief of the same had sent forward spies to ascertain where the ranch was situated, the number of fighting men there, and all other particulars in regard to it.

The presence of the two trailers at the "open," viewing the corpse of Red Wolf, had at once caused the chief to come to this conclusion, and he resolved that not one of the Apache spies should return with the desired intelligence.

How well he kept this resolve, the reader is already aware.

Chiota believed there were no more spies between himself and the war-party, and he determined to discover the same, if it were possible for him to do so. It was not reasonable to suppose that the war-party would expose themselves on the open plain.

The presence of the spies was evidence sufficient to form such a decision; for, had the war-party intended to expose themselves and boldly attack the ranch afterward, they would not have thought it necessary to send spies down the river, as the plainly-marked cattle-trails, made by the animals going to the corrals for salt, would guide them to the ranch without trouble by daylight. It was

evident, therefore, to Chiota, that the war-party must be encamped up the Rio Medina, and probably at no great distance from the point where he himself and Dancing Fawn had located their camp.

To discover them, the chief had now but to follow the trail of the spies.

He knew well that the Apache scouts had not come down the river on foot.

This would be simply ridiculous to suppose.

They were "horse" Indians, and almost helpless on foot when it came to a fight; and a fight they might expect at any moment, so near to a large ranch. Red Wolf must have been alone, and had detected in some manner, probably by hearing the horses stamp and whisk their tails, that he was near some human beings, and who must be enemies; for it was unreasonable to suppose that horses, at that time of the day, would be in the timber unless secured there by their owners.

Red Wolf had dismounted to investigate, and discovering but a solitary squaw, whom he knew at once to be a Creek—a hated affliator with the whites—he resolved to capture her and the animals. Had he not been so hasty, he might have studied the little camp more thoroughly, and known that the young squaw had a skillful and merciless defender in the near vicinity, and been more cautious in his attempt to secure her.

This appeared to indicate to the keen-witted Chiota that the two spies, who were in company, had been but a short distance in the rear of Red Wolf. They had heard the revolver-shots, hastened forward, discovered their comrade's mustang, and leaving their own animals at the same point, they had at once hastened to the assistance of their brother spy, but only to lose their own lives.

Thus reasoning, Chiota hastened at once to the point where Dancing Fawn had informed him that she had first discovered her intended abductor.

It was no easy matter to follow the trail of the Apaches, when they had been on foot, in the dimly-lighted shades; but the Creek chief soon detected the fact that the last two Indians had followed directly the trail of Red Wolf to the little "open." This almost proved that his conclusions had been correct, and as fast as was possible, and at the same time keep on the "sign," the chief hastened forward.

Ere long he heard the stamp of hoofs, and no longer caring for the trail, Chiota bounded toward these sounds, but slacking his speed, and going more stealthily, as he neared the point where he knew the animals must be.

In a little time he obtained a chance to gaze through the foliage, and upon the mustangs of the braves who were then lying, dead and scalped, down the river.

The eyes of Chiota expressed the most utter amazement blended with concern and apprehension. For, instead of three horses, as he had expected to find, there were six, all being equipped with saddles and jaw-straps, and secured by neck-ropes where they could crop the tall wild rye.

This greatly startled the chief, for he feared that the Apaches, or at least the three of them that remained alive, had taken a course down the Rio Medina, between the "open" where Red Wolf had been slain and the southern portion of the timber at its border from whence they could, at times, view the plain—thus being unobserved by himself and Dancing Fawn.

Yet, it was strange that these three Apaches had not been at the "open" warned by the revolver reports that, without doubt, some of their comrade spies were in danger.

Chiota was now in a very puzzled and anxious state, for he could not at once decide what course to take.

Possibly both Dancing Fawn and Bertie might be captured by the trio of Apache spies; but, upon reflecting, the Creek reasoned that his squaw, having his revolver, would shoot, and defend herself, and Bertie besides. Both were, besides, better mounted than the Indians, and were within a short distance of Bancroft Ranch.

Relieved by these reflections, Chiota at once selected the best mustang of the six, mounted, and then led the other animals to the river-bank; forcing them into the water, and to swim to the opposite, or northern side.

This done, the chief continued on, up the Rio Medina, following a cow-path, which ran parallel with the stream, and but a few feet from the bank; the undergrowth on each side being of sufficient height to screen him from view.

At times Chiota halted, and listened intently for sounds which would indicate the presence of the Apache war-party; but, not until he had passed up the river fully a mile, was he successful in hearing anything favorable to his suspicions and mission.

Then, there was no doubt.

He could distinctly hear the almost continuous stamp of many hoofs. At once he dismounted, and secreted the mustang he had appropriated, in a dense thicket.

Without loss of time the Creek proceeded upon hands and knees, crawling silently and with great caution toward the point from which the tell-tale sounds emanated.

The noises common in an Indian camp when in the company of an enemy were but slight, yet the keen ears of Chiota heard and mentally appropriated them all. In five minutes he was in a dense thicket, from the foliage of which he could peep out upon a most fiendish scene.

The "open" selected by the Apaches was of considerable extent, and upon its northern side there was a belt of timber, which for some twenty yards was entirely free from undergrowth, the trees being quite large and the branches growing to within ten feet of the ground.

Chiota noted every feature of the savage scene.

Full seventy wild-eyed mustangs were staked in the "open," the condition of the animals proving at once to the Creek that the gallop of the Apaches since they last encamped must have been long and rapid, and not only this, but that the war-party had but recently arrived at the "open" on which they were bivouacked.

The mustangs were lank and hollow, and their hair was matted with dried sweat and foam.

But the intention of the war-party was evident: Bancroft Ranch and its inmates were doomed to destruction, torture and death!

As this thought darted through the mind of the Creek chief his hand flew to his knife, and he gripped its handle, while his eyes flashed all the fury that was expressed in his face, notwithstanding the daubs of war-paint.

And good and sufficient cause had Chiota to be thus surprised and concerned—not only so, but furious as well. For bound tightly to the trunks of trees within the space mentioned were two young Texans, both of strong and perfect build, both handsome in face and form, both dauntless, and gazing, without a sign of fear or an expression of pain, at their captors—although Chiota knew that the cords must be cutting and their confined position a most torturing one.

And the chief at once recognized them.

They were both brave and skillful, and he was proud to call them his white brothers. But two suns had shone upon the earth since he had met one of them, and learned from him that the other was not far distant.

One was Frio Frank, and his companion in captivity was Bandera Bill, the brother of Bertie.

Black clouds were indeed hanging like a pall over the Bancroft family, who up to this time had enjoyed lives as sunny as the skies of Texas.

CHAPTER IX.

THE OLD RANCHERO.

BEN BANCROFT sat, the picture of comfort, contentment, and happiness, upon the front veranda of his pleasant home, puffing slowly at his corn-cob pipe.

He was, as he realized, well established, on one of the best ranges in the vicinity, with abundant means, and great wealth in the prospective; besides having a noble son, and a most lovely daughter. And what could he wish for more—with Italian skies above, a most agreeable and healthful climate, and Nature reveling in luxuriance around him?

Ben's life had been comparatively a happy and easy-going existence, but one great grief having been his. This was when he had lost his beloved wife. But this sorrow had been softened by time, and the many changes that time brings. In short, there was probably not a man within the precincts of the Lone Star State, who was happier and more contented, or who had any better prospects for that happiness and contentment lasting through life than Ben Bancroft.

Yet, he unconsciously stood upon a seething volcano of misery, anguish, and agony of soul, which was about to burst upon, and overwhelm him; there being naught to give him the slightest hint of the impending catastrophe.

He knew that Bertie had gone up the river, to ride and to fish, as was her wont; but the fact gave him not the slightest concern, although she had started at sunrise, and Old Sol was then near the meridian.

The fragrant aroma of coffee, and scent of meats being cooked by Auntie Sue, would have proved this to the old ranchero, had he not bent forward, and stepped to the edge of the veranda, to glance skyward, shading his eyes with his hand. Humming a tune, and clasping his hands behind his back, Ben walked to the end of the piazza, with the happiest anticipations of a capital dinner of roast turkey, broiled fish, venison, and no end of side dishes.

The fish, he feared, however, would arrive too late, if Bertie did not soon put in an appearance; and the ranchero was particularly fond of the finny denizens of the Medina, especially when they were caught by his idolized daughter. When Bertie had first arrived at the ranch from San Antonio, her father had been most particular in enumerating the dangers of the bottom-timber to his pet, cautioning her against going far from home, either up or down stream; asserting, and with truth, that bears, panthers, wild hogs, and poisonous snakes were frequently to be met with—to say nothing of tarantulas, centipedes, and scorpions.

He had even insisted that her brother should accompany her, when she ventured far from the ranch.

But all his concern, as to the safety of Bertie during her gallops and rambles, had vanished from her; she having, so many times, been absent alone some distance from her home, and never encountered any danger. She, therefore, laughed his fears away, and ridiculed the idea of her coming to harm.

Old Ben stood upon the steps of the veranda, twirling his empty pipe between his fingers, and gazing toward the entrance to the bend, and then down, in the rear of the cook's cabin, toward the belt of heavy timber in the swell.

There was not the least anxiety expressed in the ranchero's face; but, as he neither saw nor heard any evidences of Bertie's return, a shade of impatience might have been detected upon his face.

Gradually his head turned, while he ran

his eyes along the line of timber to a point exactly opposite to his position, when suddenly his strong form trembled, his face became pallid as that of a corpse, and his eyes bulged in a fixed stare from their sockets.

What did the old ranchero see, to cause such a revolution in his feelings, to plunge him in an instant from the height of happiness to the depths of agonizing despair that was almost paralyzing?

Straight ahead, but half-way between the ground and the tree-tops, framed in the foliage, was a paint-daubed face, with black, glittering eyes fixed upon him in a stare of murderous hate—a face hellishly hideous!

Only a moment was this dread sight presented to the gaze of the terror-stricken man. Then it vanished, and naught but the foliage was to be seen.

Ben Bancroft was now a grievous sight to contemplate.

Thus he stood, for full a minute, perfectly paralyzed, as far as being able to move or control a single muscle. Great beads of cold perspiration stood out upon his forehead. Then he shivered from head to foot, as a heavy groan burst from his lips, followed by the words:

"Great God, spare my darling! Spare my Bertie! Am I sleeping or waking? Was it a horrid dream or a reality? Did I see the painted face of a merciless Apache or was it a picture conjured up in my imagination?"

"By Heavens! I have not thought of an Indian to-day. It must—it must have been real! Bancroft Ranch is doomed!"

Rushing like a madman within the house, Ben Bancroft almost immediately reappeared, with revolver and bowie buckled about his waist, and his rifle clutched in his hand. Then he sprung from the veranda and bounded to the timber, his head bare, his hair flying; heading direct to a point, beneath which he had seen the terrible face, and without a thought of danger to himself.

Thus he dashed into the undergrowth, gazing the while upward amid the moss-decorated limbs.

But only limbs and twigs and vines and foliage met his view.

Surely, had there been an Indian in the tree, he could not, in so short a time, have reached the ground, unless he had slid down upon a vine. And a vine there was—a huge vine, the smaller branches of which held it fast to the limbs above; and this vine was now slowly swaying.

The ranchero rushed up to it, and soon saw that the loose bark had been torn, and the wood somewhat bruised; but on the ground beneath were the footsteps, plainly marked in the soft sward—the footprints of a woman! This "sign" proved, beyond doubt, to Bancroft, that it had been no dream or imagination on his part.

Most assuredly an Indian had been in the tree—a war-painted Apache!

Where had the red spy disappeared to, and from whence had he come?

These mental questions flashed through the tortured brain of the old ranchero as he clutched his rifle, ready to bring to shoulder; but he saw nothing. He listened intently, but no sound met his ears. Then he rushed into the timber, and on through the same, tearing through the undergrowth toward the entrance to the bend.

Around the curve of the river Ben Bancroft dashed, presenting a picture agonizing to a beholder.

His rosy, happy and contented face of a few moments previous would have been unrecognizable as the same in its pallid, drawn and haggard state. His eyes were filled with an anguish that was soul deep, and a yearning to behold once more his darling child, that was pitiful to witness.

On, up the river, ran the distracted father,

his mouth open and his breath coming and going laboriously, while his eyes stared directly before him, as if expecting each instant to behold some terrible sight that would banish hope forever.

To discover his darling a captive to the merciless torturers of the Rio Pecos, the hideous, hellish Apaches, would be the most intense suffering possible for him; for there could be little or no hope of a rescue. There was no force of scouts or rangers near, and before any considerable number of rancheros and cowboys could be summoned it would be too late.

And, indeed, it was not reasonable to suppose that the Apaches had advanced down-country that far, unless they were strong in numbers; and a force of Texans capable of combating with a large war-party could not be gotten together and to the ranch before the next night after that to come—a night which seemed fated to be pregnant with deeds of blood and torture and outrage, that would cause angels to weep and fiends to blush with shame.

It was a wonder that the old ranchero did not go raving mad, as these thoughts and reasonings darted like white-hot arrows of steel through his tortured brain. He knew well that the face he had seen—that horrid face—was that of an Apache spy, and that he was in advance of a war-party of his bloodthirsty tribe. There was no room for doubt on this subject, and it was probable that he was not alone at the bend, which fact gave grounds for the belief—aside from her long absence—that Bertie, his angel Bertie, had been captured by the advance spies of the red horde.

And awful it was to the old ranchero that Bill, his brave and skillful son, was absent at this most dreadful time. And as this regret so strong came upon him, suddenly it flashed into the father's mind that perhaps Bill had been captured.

The Apaches had, of course, advanced down the Medina from the Bandera Hills in place of following their old marauding trails between the Rio Frio and Rio Nueces, and as Bill Bancroft was hunting in the hills, he might indeed have been taken.

The old ranchero gave vent to his agony of mind by another heartrending groan, as this dread probability was fully realized; and so terrible was the consequent shock to his physical system that he fell to the earth, and lay for a time sobbing like a woman—the tears relieving his overtaxed brain.

Then he staggered to his feet, ran down to the water's edge, and cast the cooling wine of nature with his hand up into his parched mouth and over his fevered face and head. Only a moment or two he thus lingered. He then sped on with renewed vigor and strength of will, calling upon God to save and protect his children.

On, and still on, only knowing that he was approaching the furthestmost haunt of his daughter, where she frequently caught fish for him. He was confident that he had not passed her, for she always followed the cow-path that led along the river-bank when the sun was high in the heavens, to avoid the heat of the open plain.

He had not dared to call aloud the name of his child, lest, should she be safe, he might be the means of her capture. And, knowing that he would soon reach the last point that Bertie ever advanced westward, the reader can but faintly imagine the dread anxiety that caused the old man to be deathly faint, as he heard no indications whatever of Bertie's presence, or the presence of her mustang, when he neared the narrow clear space on the bank, above the log from which she usually fished.

Old Ben Bancroft burst through the undergrowth with great force and momentum, and his legs mechanically bore him on, without any controlling power being exerted by him. Soon his starting eyes became fixed

upon that most terrible and repulsive tableau—the two scalped Apaches, all gashed and covered with gore, reclining upon the carcass of the monster bear!

Right up to within ten feet of that horrible sight, ran Ben Bancroft. Then his muscles ceased action, and he came to an abrupt halt; his lower jaw dropping, as if stricken with death.

He staggered, trembling for a moment. Then he raised his clinched fists high above his head, his eyes became fixed upon the sky, and a hoarse whisper burst from his lips.

"God in Heaven! where is Thy justice, Thy mercy?"

These whispered words could not have been heard three feet from the old man who spoke; and, as the same left his lips, his eyes appeared to lose all power of sight, and he fell backward upon the sward, his face upturned, and so corpse-like, that He who notes the fall of a sparrow could alone see, and hear, and understand, and answer.

Let us hope that the unhappy father's supplication for his daughter was answered, and leaving him thus, we again turn our attention to Bertie, and her companion, the Creek squaw, Dancing Fawn.

CHAPTER X.

THE FAIR CAPTIVES.

WHEN Chiota, the Creek, discovered that there had been six Apache scouts, who had left their horses above the "open" where Red Wolf met his death, he had been for a moment undecided as to his future proceedings; he being confident that the three Apaches, who had not been seen by himself or Dancing Fawn, had passed the point where their comrade braves had met their death some time previous to the shooting of Red Wolf by the young squaw.

Red Wolf had detected the presence of the horses of the chief and Dancing Fawn, had left the two braves, and crawled forward, spending much time in his slow progress, and in viewing the little camp, and the beautiful Creek squaw. Thus the trio of braves gained some distance, and not being suspicious in connection with the dull reports of Dancing Fawn's revolver—probably thinking it had been fired by some white hunter.

The two braves in waiting upon Red Wolf had been doubtless alarmed by his shouts and death-howl, and had advanced slowly and cautiously, thinking at least two white men had been encountered by their comrade; so quickly had the last report followed the first.

This caution of the two Apaches had, perhaps, saved either himself or his squaw, or both from being shot from the bushes, and had not the shriek of Bertie caused them to hasten to the river-bank, such might have been their fate.

Thus reasoning, Chiota decided to follow the trail of the spies to the camp of the war-party, trusting to the skill and cunning of Dancing Fawn to protect herself and Bertie from being killed or captured by the three surviving Apache scouts before the women could reach Bancroft Ranch. Whether the Creek chief used good judgment in his decision we must judge as the narrative progresses.

Most certainly the Fates seemed determined to guide our friend's footsteps on trails most devious and dangerous, causing strange and startling events and discoveries.

But we must now follow Bertie and Dancing Fawn, as also the three Apache spies—a trio of most dangerous demons to be in the vicinity of the pair of female beauties and of Bancroft Ranch.

Chiota had been right to a certain extent in his conclusions as to the movements and position of the spies, whose presence down the river had been revealed by the number of equipped mustangs.

The three had reached a considerable distance from their animals when Dancing Fawn had shot Red Wolf, the reports of the revolver sounding dull as the timber and undergrowth were dense. Had it been during the night the reports would have sounded much louder.

The three braves halted at once, gazing into each other's eyes. Then they held a hasty consultation, which ended in their deciding that some white man must be hunting near the river. It must be said here that their experience had been limited. They were young braves who had never been in battle except once, and then had taken good care to keep out of the range of Texan bullets.

By peering from the outer border of bushes they had, previous to the reports, discovered three or four mules, which they knew, by the way the animals hung their heads downward, had been worked in harness, walk from the plane into the bend where Bancroft Ranch was located, and they at once concluded that the beasts were proceeding to the corrals, and that the ranch to which the stock on the plain belonged was in the bend ahead of them.

Again they argued that if the gunshot reports which they had heard came from a white hunter he must belong to the ranch, and would return to it with his game, going along the bank of the river.

It was therefore decided that two of them proceed with caution to the river and capture the hunter, while the third, or remaining brave proceeded down the border of the timber to the bend ahead, and make sure that the ranch was there, besides gaining all the information desired by their chief in connection with the ranch, which was to be attacked the coming night.

After this arrangement was decided upon, it was immediately put into practice, the lone brave hastening toward the bend, where some time after, as the reader has doubtless surmised, his paint-daubed face was discovered by the old ranchero.

The two red spies made their way stealthily to the river-bank, and upon perceiving the cow-path that led along parallel with the stream—there being plain "sign" of recent travel of a shod horse over the path—they at once decided that their conclusions were correct; that a white hunter had fired the shots they had heard; that he would come down the cow-path, and they could easily capture him.

As their intended victim had firearms, and they had none, they knew that they must use great skill and caution. If possible, they wished to capture him for the torture, as this would give them renown, and perhaps an eagle-feather in each of their fillets.

Consequently, each having a lasso coiled about his waist, they uncoiled the same, and recoiled in hand, with nooses adjusted. Then they climbed up into the branches of a huge tree, directly over the path, the moss-draped branches affording perfect concealment.

For some time they waited, with the patience of their people, before they heard or saw any indications of the approach of living creature of any kind. Then the click of hoofs upon the small stones in the path warned them that the time had arrived for them to distinguish themselves, or die in the attempt.

To their great amazement, they presently heard the silvery voice of Bertie Bancroft. But they were destined to be still more astonished, and to be greatly pleased and exultant; for soon the squaw and the beautiful white maiden were seen through the branches. They quickly agreed as to which of the women each would bend skill and strength to secure as a captive.

They recognized, by the dress and trappings of Dancing Fawn, that she was a hated Creek, who affiliated with the *diablos Tex-*

anos; and they knew that their chief would reward them highly for her capture, as well as that of the white squaw.

As soon, therefore, as our unfortunate friends had reached a favorable place, down dropped the lasso over their heads and shoulders, by a sudden jerk of the slack sideways being tightened by the Apaches, binding the arms of Bertie and Dancing Fawn to their sides; while the lurkers sprung downward, one landing upon the horse of Bertie, behind her, and clasping his arm about her. He then wound the slack of the lasso around her, Dancing Fawn being treated in the same manner. Bertie shrieked in terror and aversion, but not a sound issued from the lips of Chiota's squaw.

At once the horses were guided toward the south, through the shades of the timber, to await the coming of the other Apache spy, who had proceeded to the bend, in order that he might satisfy himself that the ranch was there located.

So startling and unexpected had the lassoes encircled them, and the Apaches pounced upon them, that even Dancing Fawn did not have time to draw her revolver or knife. She, however, submitted, in seeming stoical indifference to the inevitable; being bound in such a manner as to render the least struggle not only entirely useless, but torturing to her.

With great satisfaction, the brave who had captured the Creek squaw deprived her of the weapons in her belt.

But, to describe the horror and utter despair of poor Bertie would be beyond the power of words. Her face was ghastly as death, and stamped with horror, and no wonder that it was so.

It had been a day filled with fearful experiences for the poor girl; and more so, from the fact that never before had danger, or even dread sights, been known to her. Happy, and relieved, and thankful had she been, at being rescued on both occasions by the brave and noble Creek chief, and extremely rejoiced at forming the acquaintance and friendship of Chiota and Dancing Fawn; she having promised herself great pleasure in entertaining them at her home. Delighted, too, had the maiden been, on finding that her brother was known to them; and she looked forward to the pleasant surprise it would give him and her father, when they should visit Bancroft Ranch.

All her joyous anticipations had, however, been transformed to terror and despair, upon being captured by the Apache spies, so totally undreamed of had such an event been. In fact, if thought of at all, it had been considered impossible, after reaching a point so near her home; and poor Bertie was completely dazed. Her tongue, after her first shriek, refused its office. Her eyes became fixed and glassy. Even the fact that Dancing Fawn had been in her company, and was also a captive, was banished, for the time, from her mind.

Soon they reached a small "open," near the border of the bottom-timber, where the Apaches sprung to the ground, and the eyes of Bertie, as her mustang half-whirled to rub its muzzle in sympathy against that of its mate, met the black orbs of her Creek friend.

Then, suddenly, the thought entered the brain of Bertie that her red sister had been captured, and would perhaps lose her life; and all, through Dancing Fawn's friendship for her, and for her brother, Bandera Bill.

As this was fully realized, the maiden met the eyes of the handsome squaw, which expressed only sympathy, and Bertie burst into a flood of tears.

Dancing Fawn flashed scornful and contemptuous glances from one to the other of her captors, as she spoke in taunting words to them:

"Apaches are coyotes. Go on war-path to find squaws. Heap scare when war-cry

of Chiota sound in ears. Chiota on war-path, on trail. Soon find Dancing Fawn, find pale-face squaw.

"Red Wolf has gone to his fathers. His death-howl sound when Dancing Fawn shoot. Red Wolf die at hands of squaw. His scalp hangs at Chiota's belt. So many more"—extending two fingers—"lose scalp, sound death-howl up river. Coyotes laugh in bush. Buzzards fly over trees. Gnaw Apache bones. Pick out Apache eyes when night comes.

"When Chiota come, sound war-cry. Then more scalps on belt of Dancing Fawn's chief."

As she spoke the last words, she pointed at the heads of her two captors, who had listened to her with intense astonishment, mingled with dread; although these feelings were not expressed in their faces.

No longer were the two revolver-shots attributed by them to a white hunter.

Both now knew that Chiota, the Creek, was on the Medina, although they had not connected the presence of the beautiful squaw with such a possibility. They regarded the Creek chief with feelings akin to superstitious awe, notwithstanding the fact that they had never seen him.

They looked into each other's faces, and then gazed along on their back-trail, as if expecting to behold Chiota rushing upon them, and to hear his terrible war-cry. But all was as before. Naught was within view, except bush and vine, branch and tree-trunk and drooping moss.

They listened intently, their hands clutched about the handles of their murderous blades, while the eyes of Dancing Fawn shot upon them glances of scorn and contempt.

This was but for a few moments.

Then the Creek squaw spoke to Bertie:

"Let not rain of sorrow fall from eyes of my white sister. Chiota's arm is strong. His knife is sharp. My chief run like deer. He can see sharp. Death-howls of Apaches sound quick when Chiota's war-cry sends coyotes from bush to hole. Scalps on my chief's belt not dry.

"More will hang there before sun come again. Apaches who throw ropes on squaws soon go on long dark trail. Bertie, Dancing Fawn, both be free."

Every word was heard by their captors, but they did not understand more than half, although the young squaw repeated each sentence in English to her friend, after speaking in the language of her tribe for the benefit of the Apaches. Most impressive were her words to the two savages; and, though they betrayed it not, they were filled with superstitious terror, and fear of Chiota's vengeance.

Bertie was rendered somewhat hopeful, and she strove to control herself, as she replied:

"I will try to think as my red sister does. I do pray that Chiota may rescue us. But, oh, my poor father! He will die if I am taken from him. And where is my brave brother, Will?"

At this instant the remaining Apache spy sprung into the open from his mission to the bend.

A moment he stood, his black eyes flashing, as he gazed at the beautiful captives, with gloating exultation. He then uttered a single ejaculation of joyous surprise:

"Ugh!"

A silent signal from the other two, and the new-comer followed them into a thicket; the captives hearing a low, muttered consultation. Then the red fiends reappeared—the two who had captured our friends leading the horses up the river, west, toward the camp of the war-party; the other leading the way, and all keeping near the border of the timber. This last was the reason that the old ranchero, who, in his mad search, kept near the river-bank, passed them, and lay

senseless beside the carcass of the bear, and the corpses of Chiota's victims.

And that, before his darling and Dancing Fawn, in the power of their merciless captors, had reached a point in a line with the late camp of Chiota and his squaw, and the scene of Bertie's narrow escapes from death; first by the serpent's fangs, and next from the monster bear.

CHAPTER XI.

THE RESCUE AND THE ROUT.

CHIOTA, the Creek, neared the camp of the Apache war-party, while thoughts and plans flashed lightning-like through his brain. From the moment he had discovered his two white friends in their most perilous predicament, he had resolved to rescue them, or lose his life in the attempt; and no one knew better than the chief, how hazardous this would be. But he was not a man to hesitate, or to linger, after once making up his mind in what way to act.

He, after a study of matters as existing within the encampment, realized that the Apaches had not the slightest suspicion of there being an effort made to rescue the captives; indeed, they did not seem to think that any whites, or other enemies, were in the vicinity.

More than anything else, this was proved from the fact that not one of the mustangs was equipped; and it would have been considered necessary, had the Apaches any idea of being attacked, to have kept as many as a score of their horses, and as many braves in readiness, the latter fully armed, to bound upon the animals at a moment's notice.

Not only was this favorable to the purpose of the chief, but there were no Apaches in the rear of the captives; all being outside of, or beneath the outer branches of the line of timber.

The chief of the war-party, Chiota recognized readily, from the hideous ugliness of his deeply scarred face, as the bloodthirsty and merciless Lone Wolf; and it was evident to the Creek that the Apache leader felt perfectly secure from attack, he being very careless, especially when his location near the border line of the ranches was considered.

The roving, keen gaze of Chiota discovered, not only the two fleet horses of the captives, but the saddles, carbines, and side-arms, which had been taken from his friends; the animals being staked on the border of the timber, away from the herd, and within fifty feet of his position—the arms and equipments hanging upon the limb of a tree, quite near the bound men.

These important matters were kept to the front in the Creek's mind, and he greatly regretted that Dancing Fawn was not with him, to create an alarm on the east side of the "open," while he made an attempt at rescue on the west. The lives of the two Texans clearly depended upon his own personal efforts. Indeed, a terrible death by torture would be their fate, unless he bent every energy, and practiced every cunning, in their behalf. Then, too, he must act promptly.

After once more gazing at the two captives, whom he could not determine whether wounded or not, the chief crawled back stealthily through the undergrowth, circling westward, and in a very short time was in the thick branches of the trees between the river and the camp, through which he stole from tree to tree, high up from the ground, toward the captives. He drew after him, with extreme caution, a long, slender pole, which he had cut on the bank of the stream.

In ten minutes more, he found himself within the branches of the very tree, to the trunk of which Bandera Bill was secured.

Without delay, Chiota stole downward; but, before proceeding far, he drew his bowie, and bound the handle fast to the end of the pole he had cut.

Gaining a safe position, he spoke to himself, in a hoarse whisper:

"Let white brothers keep still. Chiota will save from Apache torture-stake."

Low as this was spoken, the sound reached the ears of the captives. Great, indeed, was their joy; for they knew that the Creek chief could accomplish more, with the least danger to himself, than any other man they could bring to mind.

But the presence of Chiota in the tree over their heads, caused the captives the most intense apprehension and anxiety; for they knew that their red friend intended, in some manner, to cut their bonds, and they were confident that, in their benumbed state, they could not maintain a standing posture, as circulation had been stagnated by the tightly-drawn cords. To sink to the earth would not only render the Creek's attempt futile, but would endanger his life, and cause them to be more thoroughly bound, and better guarded than before.

Their suspense and anxiety was now the source of a terrible strain upon their minds, which previously were in a very sad and hopeless state.

They had great confidence in Chiota, but they feared that his zeal and anxiety on their account had blinded him to the important particulars connected with their condition and position. But they soon saw that they had misjudged their friend.

Securing the scalping-knife by the handle tightly to the end of the slender pole he had brought with him, Chiota quickly thrust the same down behind the huge tree-trunk, which concealed it from the view of the Apaches. He then quickly cut the cords that bound Bill's ankles to the tree. Then drawing upward his pole, the Creek passed into the next tree, moving with great caution, when he severed the ankle-bonds of Frio Frank.

Both young Texans at once saw that their red friend had his wits about him; for the bonds, which held their arms around the trunks, assisted in holding them in a standing position. Had their wrists been freed first, they would have sunk to the earth.

Watching well the Apaches, who were engaged in voraciously devouring meat, Chiota waited until the muscles of the captives had recovered sufficiently to maintain their weight, when he cut loose the wrist-lashings; leaving the two young men, with difficulty keeping up the same attitudes. The torture they both suffered, from the agonizing suspense and anxiety, during the first few moments after being cut free, was simply terrible, causing a deathly faintness, which only by superhuman effort they threw off, more on account of Chiota's peril than their own.

The chief waited only to see that all was well with them. Then he quickly, with a hiss of caution, stole through the moss-draped branches toward the river, to a point where the undergrowth was dense.

Then he dropped to the earth, securely screened from view, and wormed his way to a position where, within a few feet of him, hung the two belts of arms belonging to his white friends. This time he held in hand a shorter and stouter pole, which he knew would reach to the limb, upon which hung the indispensable weapons.

The Fates appeared to favor the efforts of the noble, self-sacrificing Creek at this particular moment; for two of the mustangs got into a terrific fight, which threatened a stampede, and thus drew the attention of all the braves. This fact was instantly taken advantage of by Chiota, who thrust forward his pole, and slipped the belts of arms off the branch.

He could hardly repress a yell of exultation, as he cast aside the pole, and held in his hand two brace of Colt's "sixes" and a pair of bowies.

The chief, however, lingered not; for life and death to himself and his white brothers

might depend upon a moment's time. Stealing on amid the undergrowth, he made his way back to the same point where he had dropped to the earth from the tree. There he recovered the slender pole we have mentioned.

Five minutes after Chiota was again in the tree over the heads of Bill and Frank, and their relief and joy can be but faintly imagined upon finding again their revolvers in their hands. It caused the captives to breathe once more, free hope filling their late despondent breasts.

Their bowies were also lowered by attaching them to the end of the pole by a piece of wire grass, the Creek retaining two of the revolvers for his own use. These he had examined and reloaded the empty chambers, he having ammunition in his bullet-pouch for his own revolver, which was of the same caliber.

Having thus carried out successfully his well-arranged plans in an astonishing short time, Chiota bent downward and again whispered:

"White brothers keep still. Chiota go for mustangs. Apaches are squaws. Chiota will spit in face of Lone Wolf."

The Creek then disappeared among the branches.

It seemed hours to the impatient young Texans before again they knew anything in regard to the whereabouts of their red rescuer; but when Chiota did put in an appearance, it was in a most unexpected, imposing and startling manner, and from a direction totally undreamed of by Bandera Bill and Frio Frank.

When the chief had whispered his intentions the young Texans had been dumfounded. They feared to whisper, or even to look upward; for the snake-like eyes of some of their captors were fixed upon them with vengeful hatred.

Both maintained still the same position as when they had been bound to the trees.

Had they but dared to speak they would have pleaded with Chiota not to take further risks to secure the horses, but to make a dash with them back into the shades, trusting to Bandera Bill's knowledge of the cow-paths to elude their pursuers, or else to their revolvers to prevent the Apaches from recapturing them.

The success of the Creek chief up to that time had been simply miraculous, and they felt that it was tempting Fate too much for him to endeavor to recover their steeds. Chiota, however, had been encouraged by his remarkable success, and believed that he could accomplish almost any desperate act, he holding the Apaches in contempt more and more as he had succeeded in each of his plans.

His pride of tribe was deep, and his strength of will and purpose was strong. He, therefore, resolved that his hated foes should know who it was that had outwitted them. With this in mind, he proceeded at once in the direction of the mustangs. Gaining the desired position, he crawled forward, clutched the brave who was on guard by the long, black hair, jerked him quickly backward and plunged his long knife, hilt deep, into the painted breast.

The howl of death that followed brought every brave to his feet, all rushing toward the point whence it had proceeded; but before they could make their way through the terrified mustangs Chiota had reached the spot where the horses of his friends were lariat. A moment after a bird-like cry, the meaning of which the Texans knew, was heard by the latter.

"Come, Frank!" exclaimed Bill. "Chiota is on hand, and the time for escape has arrived."

"All ready, Bill! Hurrah for the Creek!"

Both sprung and clutched saddles and bridles, the chief bounding toward the affrighted herd of mustangs, and springing

astride of the animal best suited to him, he sped toward his white friends, passing, as he reached them, one of the weapons which he had retained to Bandera Bill. The latter, with a "six" in each hand and reins between his teeth, sat his saddle, almost frantic with delight; but not more so than was Frio Frank, his pard. Thus the intrepid trio started.

Then followed a grand and daring act, as more than two-score Apache warriors stood for a moment dumfounded at the tableau before them. But not for long. The Texan yell from Bill and Frank blended with the wild war-whoop of Chiota, and all at the same instant dashed forward. Leaden hail hurtled amid the amazed Apaches, and Lone Wolf roared his rallying signals in vain.

Death-howls and yells of agony sounded. Arrows flew wildly through the air, and mustangs reared and plunged. All this caused a stampede among the staked steeds, which, with terrific bounds, crashed through the undergrowth, while our three friends dashed into the timber, Bandera Bill in the lead.

All galloped down the Rio Medina toward Bancroft Ranch, leaving Lone Wolf and his braves a most demoralized war-party—their mustangs scattered in the shades, and a dozen warriors mangled and dead in their very camp.

Well might Frio Frank, after this, fairly yell the words, in which he was joined by Bandera Bill:

"Hurrah for Chiota, the Creek!"

CHAPTER XII.

LOVED FOR THE DANGERS HE HAD PASSED.

THE confusion and demoralization among the Apaches was so intense that Lone Wolf was unable to restore an approach to order for some time, and then the main object of all the party was to recover their mustangs, without which they would be helpless, and would fall easy victims to any small company of rancheros who might encounter them.

In consequence of this, our friends were safe from pursuit.

"We owe you our lives, Chiota," said Bandera Bill, "and we shall not forget it, I assure you."

"Indeed, we shall not," added Frio Frank. "Talk is cheap, I know, but we are not the boys to take it out in mere talking."

But it was evident to the young Texans that the Creek chief was greatly averse to listening to any words of theirs, and he so informed them.

"Talk no good on war-path," he said, bending his ear to listen to the sounds from the Apache camp. "When Chiota say Bandera Bill brother—say Frio Frank brother—he mean what say."

"Brother fight for brother. Brother die for save brother from torture. It is enough. No want thanks. Come. Go down river."

"Dancing Fawn down to ranch. Go with Bandera Bill sister. Name Bertie. Snake want bite Bertie. Chiota shoot off head. Bear want eat Bertie. Chiota kill bear. Come see."

"More Apache down river. So many"—holding up three fingers—"Chiota he kill down river. Take scalp. See!" pointing to his belt.

When the chief mentioned Bertie, Bill jerked his steed to a halt, in much concern; and, as Chiota ended his remarks, he cried out:

"Great Scott! Has she really been in such danger?"

"Chiota has spoken," returned the Creek.

"Shake again, pard!" said the young man, impulsively. "This has been, indeed, an eventful day. Why, Bertie, I do believe, never saw anything in her young life to frighten her."

"It seems, chief, you have been expressly

detailed by the Fates, as our guardian angel. By Crockett! But strange things do happen in this world of ours!"

All had started on, down the river again, while Bill was speaking.

"You are just right, pard," agreed Frank; "it is perfectly astounding to think over the events of the day. But I hope your sister has arrived safe at the ranch. However, as Dancing Fawn is with her, we may conclude that all is well."

"It seems that, terrible as our capture was, we have, after all, thanks to Chiota, arrived in time to defend your home against the demons. Those who came down the river were doubtless spies, who were seeking information, with a view of attacking Bancroft Ranch."

"Lone Wolf may be frantic and revengeful, and may now seek to carry out his prearranged programme of destroying your home, murdering or capturing us, and driving all the stock to the Pecos."

"By heavens! He will have a slim war-party to return with," exclaimed Bandera Bill. "We have shown him that we can scoop his warriors in, by the wholesale; but we'll give him more proof of the same kind, if he advances down the Medina. The ranch is built as strong as a fort."

"I know Lone Wolf well enough to be confident that he will not return, Pecos-way, without a desperate attempt at avenging the loss of his braves, and the release of ourselves by Chiota. We must not lose sight of such a probability."

"How many Apache spies came downstream, Chiota?" asked Bandera Bill.

The Creek held up six fingers.

"And you killed so many?" Bill repeated, extending three fingers.

The chief bowed affirmatively, but immediately after corrected himself.

"Chiota he kill so many"—holding up two fingers—"Dancing Fawn, so many"—adding a third digit.

"Good for her!" said Bill, with relief; "I feel easier now. I reckon Dancing Fawn will see Bertie safely through."

For some time, all rode on in silence.

Often, in days past, since having formed the acquaintance of Bill Bancroft, and heard so much from him in regard to Bertie's beauty and intelligence, had Frank Forbes found himself thinking of the sister of his friend; and, in his imagination, he had painted a picture of her, as he thought she would appear when he should have the pleasure of meeting her.

In fact, Frank so often found his mind dwelling upon Bertie that this seemed strange to him; and he mentally accused himself of being in love with a maiden whom he had never even seen.

He was now anxious in regard to the young girl's safety, yet there appeared to be little ground for anxiety in that direction, as Dancing Fawn was with her. It pained Frank to think that Bertie had twice that day been in imminent danger, and that he had not had the gratification of accomplishing her rescue. Meanwhile his anxiety on her account increased.

Frio Frank could not, for his life, explain why he felt thus; but there was a heavy feeling of great apprehension at his heart, and one which increased as he rode on, causing him to shoot glances in every direction.

Most certainly the guardian angel of the beautiful maiden was, in some mysterious manner, influencing Frank; for, as Bill and Chiota urged their horses down a steep bank, which cut off from them a view toward the plain, Frank, from the top of this bank, caught sight of something which caused his heart to spring to his throat.

A kind Providence it was that directed his gaze.

So flitting was the sight, remaining in view but an instant, that he almost believed

it had been born of the thoughts that had for some time ruled him, in connection with his pard's beautiful sister.

That which Frank thought he saw was a flaunting feather above the top of the undergrowth, toward the plain; and the next moment, to the rear of it, he believed that he saw the gleam of golden hair amid the foliage. He did not wish to inform Chiota or Bill of it, as he was not positive that he had seen it, after all; yet he at once drew rein, turned his horse half about, and returned on the back-trail, determined to investigate it.

Very stealthily the young Texan proceeded, and his absence was not noticed by Bandera Bill or the Creek chief until he was beyond their view.

With revolver in hand, Frank caused his horse to walk warily, and at times halted to listen; soon becoming convinced that the sight had been real indeed—only too real—and he regretted not having informed Bill and Chiota.

But it was now too late for regrets, and he braced himself for conflict.

He was positive that the three surviving Apache spies were approaching, and that they held Dancing Fawn and Bertie Bancroft captives.

The greatest caution was necessary.

And Frio Frank was caution itself.

He was soon relieved by the sight of an Apache, followed by Bertie, as he decided; for he could see that her hair was golden, and that it veiled her pale face. Behind her rode Dancing Fawn, and in the rear two more Apache braves.

One glance at that bowed and bound form would have nerved the heart of a coward; and the reader can imagine how the sinews of Frio Frank—a brave and daring young Texan—became as steel, his teeth clinched, and his senses were strained to the utmost.

Dauntless, stoical, and with disdain in her glance, rode Dancing Fawn; but her features softened, and sympathy was expressed in her glances, when they rested upon the form of her white sister.

Frank clutched his revolver firmly.

It was a game, to play which would tax his strength and brain—ay, his very soul—for thick bushes intercepted his way to the two rear Apaches, and the greatest expertness with revolver would be required to shoot, and not hit one of the captives.

But there could be no hesitation.

Hesitation meant failure.

It meant death, perhaps to himself, certainly to Bertie and Dancing Fawn.

The scene that followed baffles description.

The noble animal he rode made one terrific bound forward, as if knowing what was expected of it, and how much depended upon it.

Instantly Frank's revolver vomited fire and lead, and the leading Apache, with a horrible death-howl, threw up his arms, and fell, a corpse, over the hams of his mustang. Then, with a piercing shriek, Bertie straightened upward, and gazed around her in terror. But this feeling was at once transformed into relief and joy. As the startled cry died on her lips, Frio Frank, handsome as a veritable god of vengeance, bounded past her, a report from his revolver following.

The remaining two Apaches lost the opportunity of doing their cowardly work, for the bullets from Frank's rapidly-discharged weapon tore through the vitals of both, as their quirts were raised in air to lash their mustangs up beside the captives to slay them. Down they fell, gurgling death-howls bursting from their lips.

A moment only did Frio Frank sit his horse, the animal jerked to haunches, his eyes blazing fury and his broad breast heaving with excitement—presenting a picture that was most artistic in poise, noble, handsome and grand.

Then, quickly thrusting revolver into scabbard, he jerked his bowie, and urged his horse up to the side of Dancing Fawn's mustang, slashing apart the ropes that bound her.

The next moment he reached the side of the white captive, and then, more tenderly, he severed the cruel lasso-strings that encircled her form. Soon the last cord was cut, and she was free!

"Miss Bertie Bancroft, I am most happy to have been, as I believe, guided to your rescue. I am Frank Forbes, better known as Frio Frank—a friend of your brother and of yourself!"

Poor Bertie was unable to speak her gratitude.

Their eyes met, however, and each knew that they had met their fate.

Dancing Fawn sat her mustang staring at them both, as she muttered:

"Great Spirit send Frio Frank. Frio Frank he great warrior. Bertie got no brave. Dancing Fawn she got Chiota. Frio Frank take Bertie to lodge. Bertie she good squaw. It is good."

Frank Forbes now felt that life was indeed worth living. Soon he said aloud:

"Come, Miss Bertie; come, Dancing Fawn. We must ride fast to the ranch. Chiota and Bill are on their way there. I was with them, when I caught sight of something that led me here. Thank Heaven that I did!"

"Bill and I have been captives to the Apache dogs, and were rescued by Chiota, the noblest and 'whitest' red-man on the earth. The Apaches are furious for revenge, and they may be near us; so let us hasten on the back trail."

Frio Frank spoke rapidly, reloading his revolver as he did so. The young squaw and Bertie obeyed him in silence—both eager to reach the ranch.

Frank followed in their rear, revolver cocked and in hand, gazing backward, but at times darting a glance forward at the gold-crowned head of Bertie Bancroft—a heavenly joy filling his heart, as he, by sight, worshiped the maiden of all maidens on earth to him.

CHAPTER XIII.

FOUND WHERE HE HAD FALLEN.

It was but a short distance from the steep bank, where Frio Frank caught the gleam of golden hair, afar off amid the undergrowth, to the long, narrow, clear space, where the monster bear had so terrified Bertie. And just before reaching the scene of the young girl's startling experiences, Bandera Bill looked behind him, and observing that the pard, Frio Frank, was not within view, he drew rein; but, as the trail was winding, and amid dense undergrowth, he believed that Frank would, in a moment, appear.

Chiota, who appeared to be in a deep study, passed Bill, continuing on to the "open."

Upon Frank's not appearing, Bill turned his horse, for the purpose of returning on the trail, to ascertain what was the occasion of his pard's delay, when his attention was attracted by the same signal that the Creek had given at the Apache camp, when he wished to summon his white brothers from the trees to which they had been bound. There was no mistaking it.

Bandera Bill knew that Chiota would not give that signal, unless something of great importance had come to his notice, and the chief wished the presence of himself at once. Therefore, believing still that Frio Frank had been detained by some trivial matter, and that he would soon rejoin him and the Creek, he urged his horse toward the river; soon bursting free from the undergrowth, into the clear space where lay the carcass of the bear, and the two Apache corpses.

Bandera Bill scarcely glanced, however, at this repulsive sight; for he saw Chiota

close at hand, and recalled the signal, that had momentarily been banished from his mind.

Up directly he rode, beside the Creek, noticing that the gaze of the latter was bent downward, upon the ground, at a point which the horse of the chief hid from view. Riding around, Bill at once uttered a groan of mortal anguish, and cast himself from his saddle, sinking to his knees at the instant his feet touched the ground. There lay, outstretched, the corpse-like form of his aged father.

Chiota had discovered the apparently dead white man, who he knew had not been there when he and Dancing Fawn, and Bertie, had left the scene of the bear-fight, and conflict with the two Apaches. He had then given the signal, summoning Bill, to ascertain if the latter knew who the seeming dead man was. Chiota had never met the old ranchero, and as a matter of course, had not the remotest idea that the father of his pard, Bandera Bill, lay on the ground beneath him.

When he witnessed the emotion of the young man, however, the chief immediately dismounted; guessing at the truth, and proceeding, at once, to examine the seeming corpse.

"Chiota," exclaimed Bill, in agony, "we are all doomed! Death and destruction are fated to overwhelm our family and our home."

Then, springing to his feet, his hands pressed upon his brow, he exclaimed:

"Chiota, there lies my father, dead! His death is a mystery, for I see no wounds. Oh, my brain will burst!"

"Father no dead, Bill. Chiota get water. Soon see stand up. Soon hear talk."

"Do you think so?" asked the young man, eagerly. "Can it be that life still remains? In Heaven's name, what has happened?"

But the chief was at the river before these words were finished, soon returning with a gourd of water. He said nothing, but proceeded to lave the ranchero's head, and pour the refreshing liquid into his mouth; while Bill chafed his father's wrists. Soon Ben Bancroft opened his eyes, and groaned heavily.

"Speak to me, father! How came you here, and what has happened at the ranch?" Bill uttered this in pleading tones.

The old man struggled, and with the help of his son and Chiota gained a sitting posture, when he stared in a dazed manner around him, his eyes lighting upon the dead Apaches near him.

This seemed to recall him to a comprehension of the near past; but he caught a view of the Creek chief, and started as if shot, for he had never previously seen Chiota.

"This is my friend," said Bill. "It is Chiota, a friendly Indian, and loyal to Texans. Bertie and I owe him our lives. Do tell us why we find you here and in this sad condition."

"Bertie—oh, yes! Bertie—Bill, our Bertie's gone. The red devils have stolen her!"

Bill could only glance into the chief's face.

If Bertie was captured so must be Dancing Fawn; but not the least shadow of emotion was betrayed by the stoical chief.

"Oh, father! What is it you say? Don't for mercy's sake tell me that our darling Bertie has been captured! How do you know this?"

Ben Bancroft answered:

"She rode up the river about sunrise this morning. She should have been home long before noon, but I was not worried until dinner was nearly ready. Then, when looking up and down the bend I discovered the face of an Apache fiend amid the foliage, staring at me and the ranch."

"I seized my arms and rushed to the timber, hardly believing that the sight had been

real; but I found the demon's trail, and I felt sure that Bertie was captured. I rushed like a madman here to her favorite haunt, and then I saw"—pointing to the scalpless Apaches—"what left no doubt in my mind."

"When did you leave the ranch?"

Bill's voice was hoarse and unnatural.

"Just before noon," was the reply.

Bill gazed again into the face of Chiota.

"Mebbe so Dancing Fawn ride in wood with Bertie near plain. My white brother's father come from ranch. Kerna close to river. No see Bertie. No see Dancing Fawn."

It was plain that the Creek did not wish to acknowledge, or even to think, that his squaw was not capable of defending herself and her companion, and evading capture.

But the words of the chief did not banish the anxiety and anguish of Bandera Bill.

"Chiota," he urged, "they ought to have reached the ranch two hours before noon."

"Mebbe so heap tired. Come! Go to ranch. Soon see. Apache got Bertie, got Dancing Fawn. Chiota heap mad. Sound war-cry. Kill. Scalp."

"But this is too terrible," said the agonized young man. "Father, Bertie was here, and Chiota saved her life twice; once from a huge moccasin snake, and again from a monster bear. Then the Apaches came, and had not the chief and his squaw been here the fiends would have taken her captive."

"Dancing Fawn, Chiota's wife, so he informs me, rode in company with Bertie to the ranch."

"Frio Frank and I were captured by the war-party to which these spies belonged. We were brought to a point above here, where the demon Lone Wolf is encamped. There we were bound to trees, and would have been tortured had not Chiota succeeded in rescuing us."

"We have slain several Apaches, and the survivors are furious. We are now in great danger, and must hasten to the ranch."

"Perhaps Bertie and Dancing Fawn kept near the plain, in the timber, thus missing you, and have delayed to rest. Let us hope this is the true state of affairs. We will at once hasten home and ascertain. Come, father; delay is dangerous in the extreme."

The words of explanation and hope greatly relieved the old ranchero, and he sprang to his feet with renewed life and energy.

Recovering his rifle, he said:

"You are right, my brave boy! I see you have suffered greatly, and had I known you were in the power of those red fiends, I would have galloped to your rescue alone, even had I known that certain death awaited me."

"But come; this suspense is unendurable. I must know if my child is at the ranch. My brain is on fire!"

"Come, Chiota—your hand. I have words to thank you for all you have done. My ranch is your home, and everything that I possess is yours also."

The chief returned the grasp of the ranchero, and replied:

"Apache got Bertie, Chiota save Bertie or lose scalp. It is good. Heap too much talk on war-path. Ride horse of Chiota. Chiota run."

The Creek indicated, by his words and an accompanying gesture, that the old ranchero should take his horse. Bill had mounted, but suddenly a thought of Frio Frank's mysterious disappearance shot through his mind. At that very instant, however, the rattling reports of his pard's revolver rung and echoed through the woods. All were startled.

"By the great Crockett! The red devils are coming down on the ranch. That explains Frank's absence!" yelled Bandera Bill, excitedly. "Push on, pards! Frank held back on the strength of his suspicions, and he has caught sight of the in-

fernal fiends He'll stand them off, I'll bet my head!

"They can't catch him, for he has a horse that is just everlastingly on the 'git up an' git.' But we lose time here. Frank is working, and has given us fair warning. On, for the ranch, and Bertie, and Dancing Fawn!

"If they are there, all right; if not, God help them and us! Come on; we can only die!"

Chiota circled his scalping-knife about his plumed head, and with the half-suppressed war-cry of his people, followed by the pursuit signal, he sprung into the undergrowth, down the cow-path, the old rancho following, and Bandera Bill bringing up the rear. All believed that the Apache war-party were advancing down the stream, beneath the timber, to attack Bancroft Ranch; but they hoped and prayed—oh, so earnestly!—that they would find, safe at the ranch, Bertie and the brave young squaw of the Creek chief.

Chiota, although he had spoken words that indicated his belief in the safety of his squaw and Bertie, yet had little hope that they had arrived safe. Great had been his hate, and thirst for revenge upon the Apaches, for their having slain his father and mother; but with much greater intensity, would that hatred and longing for blood and scalps ruled the brave Creek, if he should find that Dancing Fawn, his handsome squaw, had become a victim to the merciless marauders of Lone Wolf—the demons of the Scoria Mountains, beyond the Rio Pecos!

CHAPTER XIV.

JOY AT THE RANCH.

CHIOTA, the Creek, kept the cow-path, that ran near the bank of the river, and maintained the long, rapid stride peculiar to his people, which enabled him to keep ahead of the horsemen; for the branches and undergrowth rendered a faster speed than a trot almost impossible for mounted men.

On hastened the trio, not a word breaking from their lips; Bandera Bill casting frequent glances behind him, and through the occasional open spaces between the top of the thickets and the lower limbs of the trees, hoping each time to catch a glimpse of his pard, Frio Frank, for whose safety he was becoming apprehensive.

In fact, notwithstanding all that Chiota and himself had said, to lessen the grief and anxiety of the old rancho, neither Bill nor the chief felt the hope they had expressed, and they were really greatly concerned in regard to the females, both feeling positive that unless something of great moment had happened, they would have reached the ranch some time previous to the hour at which the rancho had left his home. Yet both felt that they must go to the ranch at once, and make sure that the females were not there.

If Dancing Fawn and Bertie had not arrived, then it would be certain that they were in the power of the same merciless fiends, who had, but a short time previous, been so infuriated with revenge at the liberation of their captives, and the slaying of so many of their fellow braves.

To think that it was possible for Bertie to be in such a terrible position, was great torture to Bandera Bill; and no less was Chiota agonized in regard to his beautiful squaw, although his stoical face betrayed it not.

Still on, down along the river-bank the three men went, and in due time neared the bend, within which was Bancroft Ranch, when near the entrance, the Creek turned, and made directly to the border of the timber; soon emerging from the same, and followed hastily by the old rancho, and his son, Bandera Bill.

All instantly swept the prairie, east, south, and west, up along the timber line.

The herds of horses, mules and cattle were as usual. Chiota knew that the Apaches would not make any attempt to stampede the animals until they had destroyed, or attempted to destroy, the ranch, and had slain or captured its inmates.

After losing such a number of braves, it was unreasonable for any one knowing the vengeful character of the Apaches, and especially when led by Lone Wolf, to suppose that they would return toward the Rio Pecos, or turn their trail to another range, until their terrible war-whoops had curdled the blood of the people of Bancroft Ranch, and they had exhausted their savage ingenuity in spreading devastation and death.

Seeing that all was well thus far, Ben Bancroft heaved a sigh of relief, and then urged his horse at a gallop around into the bend toward his home, his son close following, and Chiota striding on in the rear. Their eyes were immediately fixed upon the dwelling with an intense stare, hoping and praying that the gold-crowned head of Bertie would be visible on the veranda.

But not a human being greeted their longing eyes, and not even a brute, except the pack of ugly little coon-dogs, which dashed around from the rear of the dwelling, barking furiously.

Bill dashed up to the end of the veranda, where his father had stood when he perceived the face of the Apache spy framed in the foliage. From this point he could gain a view the whole length of the wide piazza, and his heart almost choked him as he saw that neither Bertie nor Dancing Fawn were anywhere visible.

The old rancho galloped up to the front of the house, directly opposite the large open space in its center. Neither he nor his son had dared to cry out. The hearts of both nearly ceased beating, in the awful anguish and agony of soul, which caused them to become sick and faint.

The barking of the curs had warned Auntie Sue of their coming, and she hurried from her kitchen, where the dinner she had so skillfully prepared was dried up and useless within the oven.

Hastening up the steps upon the veranda, at the rear of the main dwelling, the old cook, with a perfect leaning-tower of brilliant colors upon her head, rushed into the open space, in the greatest excitement and apprehension.

Bandera Bill had sprung from his saddle upon the veranda, as had his father, both running across the threshold of the open portion of the dwelling, as Auntie Sue crossed that in the rear.

"My child, Aunt Sue! Where is my child?"

Thus shrieked old Ben Bancroft.

But well he knew that no Bertie was there—that some dread calamity had overwhelmed him.

Bandera Bill, if he had not previously been satisfied that his sister had not returned to the ranch, knew at once that Bertie had been captured, by the expression of old Sue's ebon face and the anguish and horror in her eyes, as the wild words of her master pierced her ears.

"'Fo' de good Lor', Mars' Ben, I hasn't got sight ob Miss Bertie since sun-up. Yere I's hed dinner all sp'iled, waitin' fer yer, an' thet no-count last chile o' mine, Romeo, hes bin gone a-huntin' yer fer a hour. 'Sides thet, he tuck ther hui pack o' coon-dogs, an' ther critters all come back 'ceptin' one. Sure es yer borned, the debbil's runnin' this yere ranch 'bout now, an' I is all broke up."

As the old woman ended, Chiota strode proudly, head erect, and eagle-plumes flaunting, across the veranda; and, with a most unearthly shriek, Auntie Sue rushed from the rear door, and in one mad bound, sprung to the ground below, over the flight of steps,

where she sunk in a heap. She then rolled over and over, down the decline, and into the door of her cabin.

Bandera Bill and his father stood, staring at each other, in a manner that was most pitiful to behold. They were, for the time, incapable of speech or motion; even the entrance of the Creek, and the terrified exit of the old cook, being unnoticed by them.

Chiota well knew all, before he had reached the ranch; for Dancing Fawn stood not on the lawn, to give him silent, but no less sincere and affectionate greeting, as he knew she would have done had she been there.

The next moment, there shot from the dense undergrowth, his face ashen, and his clothing almost completely torn from his little form, none other than Romeo; an insignificant little cur at his heels, this one contemptible coon-dog having stuck to its diminutive master, when the pack had deserted him.

Romeo caught sight of his mother, rolling into her cabin, and his eyes became further distended, and his face more death-like. He realized that there was no security for him in the maternal cabin, and then, seeing the horse of his young master at the end of the piazza, and deciding that Bandera Bill had arrived, and must be within the house, he sprung up the steps, and wildly bounded toward his white protectors.

But, as the little darky neared them, he caught sight of the painted face and eagle-plumes of the Creek chief, and with a yell of terror, he shot forward, with arms outstretched, and fell at the feet of his young master. Instantly Bill caught the terrified little being by both arms, and lifted him to his feet, demanding:

"Speak! Speak quick, Romeo! What have you seen? What has frightened you?"

Romeo gasped for breath, his eyes fixed upon Chiota.

"He'll not hurt you, said Bill," noticing this; "he is a friend of ours. Speak, I say!"

"Golly, Marse, I's 'bout skeered ter death. I see'd yer run off wi' yer gun, Marse Ben, an' I jist thought yer'd git ther deadwood on a heap o' 'possums, an' I tuck ther dogs, an' skuted up ther bottom arter yer. But I c'u'dn't cotch yer, an' so I tuck a hunt alone."

"Arter awhile, I see'd some painted hell-yuns, an' I crawled in ther bushes wi' Chunk; fer ther t'other dogs skuted peart fer ther ranch. I climbed a tree, an' I see'd Miss Bertie with a red woman, ridin' 'long er ther cow-path. Nex' I knowed, ther red debbils had lassoeed Miss Bertie an' ther squaw. Then they skuted, an' I skuted; an' I'm plum broke up, an' so is Chunk."

"Oh, my God!" exclaimed the agonized father.

"By Heavens! There is no longer a doubt on the subject," cried out Bandera Bill; "now I am ready to fulfill my oath. Bertie, or death, is my war-cry! Father, cheer up! We must act, and not be hopeless."

"Frio Frank and I were captives, and condemned to torture, but we were rescued by this brave Creek. His wife has been taken, while she was guarding our Bertie home; and I know she would have fought bravely, had it been possible."

"Father, you have Aunt Sue and Romeo with you. Come into the house, and barricade the doors. Signal the herders and vaqueros, with rockets. They may see them, even in the sunlight."

"Chiota and I will rescue Bertie and Dancing Fawn, or die in the attempt. He is equal to this emergency, and between us we can outwit the Apaches. But you, father, must stand by the ranch. You can do no good on the trail."

"We will break through the red fiends, and join you in the defense, if they surround the ranch. Come, Chiota! We go to the rescue. I am for blood and scalps. There

must be no mercy. Death to the demons who stole my sister, and your wife."

"Good. War-path open. War-cry on Chiota's lips. Want squaw. Want Bertie. Want blood. Want scalps. Come!"

"Will, my boy, I shall go mad if I remain here. I must have a hand in the rescue," exclaimed the old ranchero, in great emotion.

"But you must remain—I insist upon it!" returned Bandera Bill. "You would only hinder us, in your great grief and impatience. Only the skill and cunning of Chiota can accomplish anything, and we must be patient."

The Creek, meanwhile, had mounted his horse, the Apache mustang he had "confiscated" at the camp of the red marauders, and which the old ranchero had ridden from the point where his son and the chief had found him.

Bandera Bill now rushed wildly out and to the end of the veranda, springing into his saddle, and turning his horse to join Chiota on the lawn opposite the dwelling. He perceived, much to his joy and relief, that his father was recovering from the terrible shock he had received sufficiently to attend to the defense of the ranch.

Jerking his scalping-knife, the Creek circled the glittering blade over his plumed head, shooting out his war-cry with vengeful intonation.

And as if that whoop had been a pre-arranged signal for a change in that tragic drama of the border, a yell came echoing it—a yell of cheer, that both Bill and Chiota knew could proceed only from their prairie pard, Frio Frank.

The sound came from the entrance to the bend, and instantly the eyes of all three men were turned in that direction, to behold a sight that banished all concern, anguish and misery; to give place to the most intense amazement, insane joy, and relief beyond expression, while another sound, sweet as the song of angels, came to their hungry ears.

This last was the rippling, musical laugh of Bertie Bancroft—a laugh of intense relief and overwhelming joy—and around the curving timber dashed the beautiful maiden, the sunlight kissing her golden head as she sat upon Colorado, her lost mustang.

The prince-like Frio Frank galloped proudly, with a look of intense happiness stamped upon his handsome face, and softening his keen eyes; while, upon the other side of Bertie, rode Dancing Fawn upon her own mustang. Frank rode the horse of the chief—the same that Bertie had ridden, until they accidentally discovered Colorado in a thicket—the mustang having, as will be remembered, stampeded when assaulted by the monster bear.

Almost wild with delight, the ranchero and his son hastened to meet Bertie, both clasping their arms about her as she sat in her saddle, while tears of thankfulness were in their eyes, and prayers of devout gratitude upon their lips.

Chiota sat his steed, in the self-same spot where he had been when the war-cry left his lips; and, straight up to within a few paces of him, rode Dancing Fawn.

Their eyes met.

"Great Spirit has sent Dancing Fawn back to Chiota! It is good! Chiota's heart was sad."

"Great Spirit send Frio Frank to shoot Apaches. So many"—the squaw extended three fingers—"hide in tree. Drop lasso. Jump on mustang. Dancing Fawn no see. No have time to shoot."

Then the young squaw turned her mustang aside, and slid to the earth. The interview between the reunited pair was at an end.

Romeo turned a dozen hand-springs, which left a trail of rags, diminishing his already meager costume to an alarming extent.

We leave the reader to imagine, if he can, the impressive scene on the lawn in front of Bancroft Ranch.

CHAPTER XV.

SAFE SO FAR.

MANY self-sacrificing and heroic deeds had been performed by Chiota, the Creek, and his friends since the war-party of Lone Wolf, the merciless Apache marauder, had entered the Bandera Hills, the day previous to that during which the dread tragic scenes were enacted on the Rio Medina, which we have been attempting to describe. But the last brave act of Frio Frank, which proved him most skillful and a true scout, and caused even Chiota to be most agreeably surprised and to regard Frank much higher than ever before, was the shooting of the three Apaches, and rescue of Bertie Bancroft and Dancing Fawn.

There was, after all his misery and anguish, no happier man on earth than the old ranchero, unless perhaps it might have been Frio Frank himself, who felt as proud and joyous as it is possible for a human being to experience on this earth, from the fact that his had been the honor and happiness of rescuing the loveliest maiden he had ever dreamed possible of existence outside of Paradise.

Frank Forbes had fallen in love with Bertie Bancroft upon first gazing on her; indeed, he believed he must have loved her before being blessed with a vision of her, from hearing her praises and having her described so often by her brother, Bandera Bill.

But Frank would not have experienced the most exquisite joy that ruled him had he not seen, mirrored in the maiden's eyes of heavenly blue, a love for him so pure and guileless that it sought not even to hide itself. This love had sprung spontaneously from Bertie's admiration of the young Texan's heroic bearing and his handsome form and face, when he dashed like an avenging god from the screen of branch and bush to the rescue of herself and Dancing Fawn.

From admiration and intense gratitude it was but a step to love, and Bertie took that step the instant the handsome stranger, to whom she owed more than life, introduced himself as the friend and comrade of her brother.

Bertie, notwithstanding the general joy and excitement, did not forget old Auntie Sue, who had not been thought of by the others, and she hastened to the cook's cabin, finding to her surprise the door closed. Poor old Sue, knowing nothing of the return of her young mistress, and still thinking that "de ole debbil war runnin' de ranch," sat against the closed door, Bible in hand—although she could not read a word—and praying most fervently. Bertie pushed at the door and called out:

"Auntie Sue! Oh, Auntie Sue!"

It is doubtful whether the old cook ever performed a more circus-like series of contortions of face and form than upon this occasion, or if the cabin door was ever jerked open more quickly or suddenly. Then, as Aunt Sue beheld Miss Bertie, she clasped her hands, and cried out in a transport of joy:

"Bress de Lamb! It am herself, sho'—my sweet chile, my baby Bertie!"

Hurriedly the young girl explained the startling events of that terrible day, and then impressed the old negress with the necessity of preparing a bountiful repast for the entire household. This was certainly much needed.

And old Sue never "hustled herself 'round" more lively, than upon this, to her, as well as to all of our friends, most important and momentous occasion. In an hour after the arrival of her young mistress, the family, with Frio Frank and the Creeks, were all seated at a luxurious dinner in the open portion of the house—their rifles near at hand to grasp at the first sign or warning of danger, their side-arms buckled about their waists, and everything in and around the dwelling in a favorable condition for defense. While, outside, at each end of front and

rear verandas, stood a burly Texan cowboy, armed to the teeth, one also being stationed at the entrance and another at the swell of the bend. These had been summoned to the defense of the ranch by the Creek chief, who had galloped over the prairie for that purpose.

The *vaqueros* were also driving in the horses, mules, and cattle, to corral the same; and everything was quiet around Bancroft Ranch, notwithstanding the tragic occurrences of the day, and the fact that there were, without doubt, two-score of furious Apaches within a few miles of the ranch, and led by the most bloodthirsty and pitiless chief on the American Continent—the arch-demon, Lone Wolf!

But our friends felt little concern, being confident that there would be no attack made on the ranch before the small hours of the coming night, when they hoped to be able to defend the place.

And, kind reader, in comparative safety, we will now leave our friends; all happy—none in the Lone Star State more so than Frio Frank and the golden-haired Bertie; and the old ranchero insisting upon his son's relating, for the third time, the circumstances connected with the capture of himself and Frank, in the Bandera Hills.

As may be supposed, Bertie and Frank paid more attention to each other than to the conversation referred to, but neither they nor the others neglected to pay every attention to Chiota and Dancing Fawn.

And thus we will leave those whom we have followed through trails of danger and death—Frank and Bertie, happy in their new-born love, and joyous anticipations for the future; the old ranchero, happy that his daughter had been restored to him; and Bandera Bill, not only rejoiced at the rescue of Bertie and Dancing Fawn, but greatly gratified at observing that his prairie pard and his darling sister were mutually attracted toward each other.

As to our red friends, Chiota and his squaw, they were contented, without doubt, in fact, they were greatly rejoiced at the way in which affairs had turned out. But their thoughts and emotions were like still waters—their stoical faces revealing nothing of the feelings that ruled their minds.

None of the party believed that if Lone Wolf did attack the ranch, the Apache chief could accomplish his purpose of capturing them; the walls being so thick, and the doors and shutters as well—the building being also provided with loop-holes.

We shall see, however, in the next number of this series—each, however, complete in itself—in which the same characters will appear, whether our friends were deceived in their belief that they could hold the ranch against LONE WOLF.

THE END.

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